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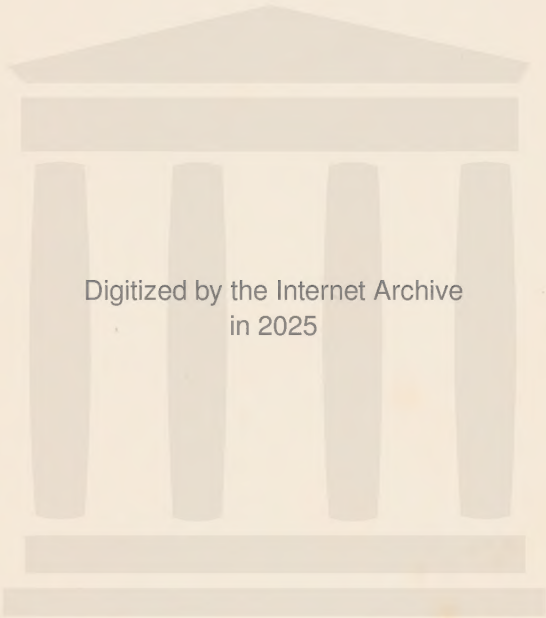
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THE SEAMY SIDE

A Story

BY

WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE

AUTHORS OF

'THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY,' 'THE MONKS OF THELEMA,' 'READY-MONEY MORTIBOY,' 'BY CELIA'S ARBOUR,' 'THIS SON OF VULCAN,' 'MY LITTLE GIRL,' 'THE CASE OF MR. LUCRAFT,' 'WITH HARP AND CROWN,' ETC., ETC.

A NEW EDITION

London

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THE SEAMY SIDE.

CHAPTER I.

ANTHONY HAMBLIN.

It is the afternoon of a day in early January, a day which recalls what foolish people mean by a good old winter. It is a day, that is, which has been easily endured and even enjoyed by polar bears, seals, Arctic foxes, people who skate, people who are warmly clad, people who are well-fed, and all creatures whose circulation is brisk. To the great majority of mankind and animals the day has been one of torture. Men out of work and low from insufficiency of food, women with babes crying from cold and hunger, children imperfectly dressed, wish it were not so cold. To the warm classes the day is a glorious winding up of that Yule-tide which they have striven to make glad. There is ice that will bear, there are branches bending beneath their weight of snow, roads crisp and hard, and, hanging over the eaves, icicles as long as a regulation sword. The cold and hungry regard these things with different feelings. To them the ideal day all the year round is warm, sunshiny, and favourable for rest, talk, and the promotion of thirst. Their pulses do not quicken even when King Christmas, who reigns only over the children of the rich, comes with frost in both his hands, bursts the pipes, stops out-door work, and puts an end to wages, beer, and food.

The broad face of Clapham Common is covered with a thin sheet of frozen snow, through which the bents and coarse grasses push up their dry stalks, and assert for the first time in their lives a distinct personality as seen against the white light of the snow, even although it is already four o'clock, and in the far-off south-west a lurid disk is sinking behind a fringe of deepest red. All day long the ponds of the Common have been covered with skaters; a bright sun without warmth has been shining; the glass has been six degrees below freezing-point in

the shade, and there has been no wind. As we look around us a change falls upon the scene; the light has died out in the east, and is fading in the west, but it seems to linger over the snow and becomes unearthly. The straggling furze, 'fledged with icy feathers,' looks, in the strange glimmer which renders any wild supposition possible, like some outlying portion of a great Canadian forest in winter garb; the frequent ditches and the fissures which everywhere cover the Common, planted there by the beneficent hand of Nature for boys to jump over, become wild ravines and deep cañons of the Rocky Mountains, whose steep cliffs and rugged sides are crowned with snow. On the Mount Pond a few young fellows are still left, loth to tear themselves away from a sport far more delightful than waltzing, and much more rare. But the day is done; the man who has been driving a roaring trade with his hot coffee can is packing up his cart; the men who have filled their pockets with coppers in reward for screwing on skates are marching off with their chairs; the two rival tradesmen, who deal in roasted chestnuts, have put out their charcoal-fires, and are comparing notes; and the man who has chanted all day, not without profit, the warming qualities of his ginger-toffee, has covered up his basket, and is thinking of what the day's returns will run to in the shape of supper. Soon the last lingering skater will feel a sudden chill of loneliness, and leave the pond with a feeling, as he strides away across the crisp and frozen snow, as if the ghosts of many departed citizens, who in generations past skated round this little wooded islet on the mimic lake, will come, the moment he is out of sight, to flourish goblin legs, perform spectral figures of eight, and rush, with silent mockery of mirth, after each other's ghostly forms. When the Common is quite deserted; when not a single loiterer is left to clash his skates together as he hastens homeward, like Cowper's postman,

> 'Whistling as he goes, light hearted wretch,
> Cold, and yet cheerful;'

then the snow begins again with its soft and noiseless falling. Presently the wind rises gently, and drives it about into drifts, and fills up the tiny ravines, and buries the furze.

All round the Common stand the stately houses of substantial City merchants—such houses as warm men loved to build early in the century—each standing in its own gardens, and these not skimped and pinched of space; no narrow London slips of ground, but broad and spacious domains, generous in lawn, flower-bed, and kitchen-garden; stocked with good old fruit-trees, which produce apples not to be bought in Covent Garden, pears which would do honour to a Corporation dinner, peaches and plums and apricots fit for a queen's table.

They are large square houses, mostly built in two stories, with attic rooms for servants. They all have ample stabling; most of them stand too close to the road for modern ideas—that was because more was formerly thought of the view across the Common than of the lawn. It was before the days even of croquet or archery. Perhaps, too, that close proximity to the road was designed in kindness to the young ladies of the family; for in those old times, so near to us and yet so far away, the cribbed and cabined girls spent nearly all the tedious and proper days of pre-nuptial life in the house, and knew the world chiefly from seeing it through the window, or reading of it in a novel of sentiment, or observing it from a pew in church.

Come with me into one of these houses—that of Mr. Anthony Hamblin, senior partner in the house of 'Anthony Hamblin and Company,' of Great St. Simon Apostle, City, indigo merchants. It is the most stately house of all. Before it stand a noble pair of cedars, sighing for Lebanon in the cold breeze, and stretching out black branches which seem about to sweep away the snow from the thin turf below them. The carriage-way curves behind them to the great porch, with marble pillars, set in the middle of the house-front. Cross the broad hall, with its bright fire, its old carved chairs and side-board, its horns and antlers, and its old-fashioned curios, brought home many years ago in one of Hamblin and Company's East Indiamen. On the right is the dining-room; behind it is the study: on the left is the drawing-room; and at the back of it, where we are going, is Miss Hamblin's own room.

A heavy curtain hangs across the door, which stands half open. There are voices within.

Let us lift the curtain softly and look in.

A lady of a certain age is sitting near the fire, a reading-lamp beside her, a book upon her knees. She wears a widow's cap, but the lines of sorrow have long since left her face, which is comely, and lit up by a soft light of comfortable benevolence, as if, being well off herself, she would wish all the world, without exception, to be in similarly desirable circumstances. She is a woman who finds pleasure in pleasant things. I am not here speaking as a fool; because, though it is hard to realise the fact, there are many women, in fact a large minority of women, who are incapable of receiving pleasure from things pleasant. Mrs. Cridland, or Aunt Flora, as Alison Hamblin called her, belonged distinctly to the happy majority, who delight in things delightful; loving, as far as the length of her tether went—naturally not very far—good eating and drinking, society, music, art, the happiness of young people. The shortness of

woman's tether deserves a special essay. Imagine the other sex as catholic, as prodigal, as eager to seize, devour, and enjoy, as critical in its tastes, as my own. Mrs. Cridland was Anthony Hamblin's first cousin, and lived in his house as chaperon, guardian, and best available substitute for a mother to his daughter and only child.

Upon the hearthrug stand a pair—a man of middle age, and a girl of nineteen or twenty. She has got her two hands clasped upon his arm, and is looking up into his face with caressing affection.

'You skated to-day as well as any of the boys, as you call them. Why, you dear old man, there were not half a dozen of the boys fit to compare with you!'

'That is what you say, Alison,' he replied, with a laugh. 'All the same, I persist in the statement that I am growing old and stiff.'

'You will never grow old, and you shall never grow stiff,' said Alison, patting his cheek with her dainty fingers.

'And you, my love, you are not tired?' asked her father. 'Why, you began at ten this morning, and you skated till one; then you began again at two, and you skated till four. Alison, I insist upon your being tired.'

She laughed.

'Anyhow, dear, do not dance too much to-night. One thing, at this party we begin so early that they are all ready to go at twelve or one.'

'I will own to being a little tiny bit tired, if you will not talk about getting old and stiff, papa.'

She had thrown off her hat, which lay upon a chair, and one of her gloves. She still had on the seal-skin jacket in which she had been skating all the day. She was above the stature of most women, a tall and shapely maiden. Her hair was a deep dark brown; so dark, that when the light was not upon it, you would have called it black; her eyes were a deep dark brown, like her hair—they were steadfast eyes; her complexion was dark; she was a pronounced brunette, of a type uncommon in this realm of England. If her look, her attitude, the way in which she curled her arm about her father's, betrayed a nature affectionate and confiding, the firm lines of her mouth, the shape of her chin, a little too square for perfect harmony with the rest of her face, and the straight line of her dark eyebrows, showed that she was a girl whose will was strong, and with whom purpose meant resolution.

Over the mantelshelf hung a portrait, in water-colour, of a young girl, in all the glorious ripeness of youthful beauty, whom Alison strangely resembled. It was her grandmother, the Señora.

The first romance in the Hamblin family, unless the success of the original Anthony be considered a romance, was that of Donna Manuela's elopement with Anthony the fifth (the man on the hearthrug is her elder son, Anthony the sixth) from a convent near Cadiz. All for love she gave up country, home, and mother-tongue. For his dear sake she became a black heretic, the only thing which ever troubled her after-life. She is dead now, and her grand-daughter, Alison, has inherited her face, her eyes, her hair, her strength of will, and her possibilities of passion.

'I believe, Alison,' said Mr. Hamblin, 'that you were sent into the world to spoil your father. Certainly to grow old is unpleasant, and to grow still more unpleasant. Well, we shall have more skating yet. Perhaps the Serpentine will bear to-morrow. Thank you, child, I *will* take a cup of tea.'

'Dinner at six to-night, auntie, remember,' cried Alison. 'Dancing to commence punctually at half-past eight. That is the rule at the Hamblin dinner.'

'As if I should forget, my dear,' said Mrs. Cridland.

'The old-fashioned time for the old-fashioned party,' said Mr. Hamblin. 'It was my father's time, and my grandfather's; although in his day to dine at six was considered presumptuous in a plain London citizen. For fifty years in this house, and for a hundred and fifty altogether, the 3rd of January, the birthday of the founder, has been kept. We shall have a good gathering to-night, Alison.'

'About the same as usual,' replied his daughter. 'Cousin Augustus Hamblin and his party, William the Silent, the Colonel and his contingent, the Dean and his wife, Mr. Alderney Cridland of course'—(here they all three smiled)—'and —and Mr. Gilbert Yorke is coming too. You asked him, you know, papa.'

'It was in a weak moment,' her father replied. 'Of course I did not expect him to accept. What attractions *can* he find at this house?' (Alison blushed, and shook her head, as much as to say, 'Alas, none!') 'Like the impudence of the boy, to come to the Hamblin dinner without being one of the Hamblin kin.'

Alison laughed. 'And then there is Uncle Stephen,' she added, with just the least possible change in her voice, which showed that Uncle Stephen was not so acceptable a guest as the young fellow she called Gilbert Yorke.

Mr. Hamblin put down his cup.

'Yes,' he said drily, 'Stephen is coming.'

And on his voice as he spoke, and on his eyes, there fell a strange change of expression, as if something of cheerfulness had suddenly been taken away. Not much, but something.

'Have you thought, auntie, about the taking-in?'

'Yes, dear, I have got it all drawn out. Here it is. Mr. Hamblin of course takes in the wife of the second partner. Augustus Hamblin takes you. The Dean takes me. Mr. Stephen takes the Colonel's wife.' She went on making up the roll. Alison observed that, by the arrangement proposed, the young man named Gilbert Yorke would sit on her left; and she acquiesced with a smile.

As Mrs. Cridland finished reading her list, the curtain before the door was pulled back noisily, in a masterful fashion, and a boy appeared.

He was a small boy for his age, which was thirteen; but he was a remarkable boy, for he was an Albino. He possessed perfectly white hair, thick white eyebrows, long white eyelashes, and a pink complexion, having pink cheeks and pink hands. In fact, he was pink all over. His eyes were sharp and very bright; his head was well shaped, with plenty of forehead. He stood for a moment in the door, surveying the group with an expression of mingled mischief, cunning, and self-satisfaction. He looked as if he were either chuckling over one piece of mischief or meditating another.

Mrs. Cridland changed in a moment at the sight of her son. She sat up, and became at once the watchful and careful mother.

'My dear,' she cried, 'are you only now returned? Come and let me look at you.'

She meant: 'Let me see if your clothes are torn to pieces.'

The boy nodded to his parent, and lounged into the room with his hands in his pockets. But he did not obey the command to go and be looked at; obedience was not his strong point. Nor was respect to persons older and superior to himself.

'Well, Nicolas,' said Mr. Hamblin, 'I saw you on the ice this morning.'

'Your uncle saw you, my dear,' said his mother, as if the distinction was one to remember with gratitude.

'Cats look at kings,' replied Nicolas the irreverent. 'I saw you too, uncle; and I saw you come that awful cropper. Ho, ho! Picked yourself up, and thought nobody saw it.'

'You see, Alison,' said Mr. Hamblin, 'I *am* getting clumsy. Go on, sweet imp.'

'A man of your weight ought to be careful,' the boy continued. 'At *my* time of life, a fall now and again is no such mighty matter.'

'Why did you not help your uncle up again, Nicolas?' asked Mrs. Cridland.

The boy glanced at his uncle, who was looking at Alison.

He therefore thrust his tongue in his cheek, and winked at his mother. He really could be a very vulgar boy.

'I was sliding,' he said, 'with a few other men. Casual acquaintances, not friends. We had an accident. I was at the head of the line, and there were about twenty five after me. I fell down, and they all capsized, turned turtle—heels up, nose down—every man Jack, one after the other, over each other's legs. Never saw such a mix. A common-keeper, who was in the lot, got a heavy one on the boko for his share.'

'Boys,' said Mr. Hamblin, 'who use slang come to the gallows. Boko is——'

'Conk or boko,' said Nicolas the vulgar. 'It's all the same. Took it home in a bag made out of a pocket-handkerchief.'

'I believe he fell down on purpose, so as to bring all the others down too,' said Alison.

The reputation of the boy was such that this unkind suggestion was immediately adopted. Moreover, he was known to cherish animosity towards common-keepers.

'And how much of the half-crown that I gave you this morning is left?' asked his uncle.

'Nothing at all.' He dived into the deepest recesses of his pockets, and pulled them inside out. They were quite empty. 'I've eaten it all: and got good value for the money, too.'

'My dear boy,' his mother interposed; 'a whole half-crown's worth of things to eat? You can't have eaten all that!'

'Every penny, mother—parliament, toffee, and gingersuck.'

'Anything shared with friends?' asked Mr. Hamblin.

'Not a farthing,' replied the boy. 'I'm not like you, Uncle Anthony, born with a silver spoon in my mouth. A man who has his own way to make can't begin by going halves with friends. Of course his friends may go halves with him: that's quite another thing.'

'A most selfish sentiment,' said Alison.

'Pretty well,' said her father, laughing.

'Nicolas, you ought to beg your uncle's pardon at once,' cried the boy's mother.

He begged no one's pardon. His eyes twinkled and winked, and his lips half parted, as if to smile, but changed their mind and became grave again.

'Let him give me his silver spoon, then,' he said, whilst Uncle Anthony laughed, and Alison boxed his ears, but in gentle and maidenly fashion, so that the chastisement only imparted a pleasant tingling of the nerves, which acted as a stimulant.

Presently the ladies went away to dress.

'Uncle,' said the boy, 'do you know that I am fourteen next birthday?'

'A great age, Nicolas,'—Mr. Hamblin had taken Mrs. Cridland's easy-chair, and was stretching himself comfortably before the fire—'a great age. I almost wish I was fourteen again.'

'What I mean,' said Nicolas, 'is—don't you think, uncle, I may stay with the other men when the ladies go?'

Mr. Hamblin laughed. Nicolas was privileged to come in with the dessert, but was expected to retire with the ladies. This interval, while it gave him opportunity too brief for eating, afforded none for conversation. Besides, it was below the dignity of manhood to get up and go away with the inferior sex just when real conversation was about to begin.

'To-day is the family dinner,' said Mr. Hamblin. 'We will make an exception for to-day; but it is not to be a precedent, remember. If you had not already had your dinner, I would let you dine with us, provided Alison could find you a place.'

The boy jumped to his feet with joy.

'Already had my dinner!' he cried. 'Why, I've had just exactly what you had: two helps of minced veal and two of currant duff. What I call a simple lunch. And you had wine too. I'll run and tell Alison I'm to dine.'

Then Mr. Hamblin, left alone, sat musing pleasantly.

He is a man of fifty-three or so, who looks no more than forty. Around his clear and steady eyes there are no crows-feet, across his ample forehead there are no lines; his hair, of a rich dark colour, is yet almost free from any silvering of time; his long full beard, of a lighter colour than his hair is, it is true, streaked with grey; his handsome face is that of a man who habitually cherishes kindly thoughts; nothing more distorts and ages a man than hard and revengeful thoughts; it belongs also to one who has lived a healthy, temperate, and active life. Needless to remind the intelligent reader that by the time a man is fifty, his daily habits have made an indelible mark upon his face. Mr. Hamblin's was a face which inspired trust—a steady face. There was nothing shifty about his eyes nor selfish about his lips; a healthy, kindly, cheerful face, which seemed to all men to be what it really was—the index to his nature. It is by an instinct which never deceives that we take a man for what his face, not his word of mouth, proclaims him. The history of his life is written there in lines which no limner can reproduce; the level of his thoughts is indicated as clearly as the height of a barometer; his history is read at first sight, and unless caught and remembered, perhaps never shows itself again.

Mr. Hamblin's musings were pleasant as he sat with his head in his hand, looking into the fire. I think they were of Alison. As for himself, life could bring him no new pleasures. He had enjoyed all, as a rich man can; he had feasted on the choicest.

There is, it is true, no time of life when new pleasures may not be found. Art, travel, study, these are ever fresh. Yet City men neither cultivate art, nor do they generally travel, nor do they study. To Anthony Hamblin of the City, the spring of youth came back when he sat and thought—for Alison. At twenty every rosy dawn is a goddess who comes laden with fresh and delightful gifts. At fifty the gifts of morning are given again to the unselfish, but they are given in trust for the children. That is the difference; and it is not one over which we need to groan and cry.

Presently carriage-wheels were heard. The earliest of the guests had arrived. Anthony Hamblin started, sprang to his feet, and ran up the stairs as lightly as a boy, to dress.

'O papa!' cried Alison, coming from her room radiant in white; 'you very, very bad man, what have you been about? I can only give you a quarter of an hour.'

'I was dreaming by the fire, my dear.' He kissed her as he passed. 'I shall take only ten minutes.'

CHAPTER II.

THE HAMBLIN DINNER.

THE Hamblin dinner was served with civic magnificence. No Company's banquet could have been more splendid, save that it was much shorter in duration. On this occasion the ancient silver-gilt plate originally made for the first Anthony Hamblin, who founded the house, was displayed to gratify the pride, not to excite the envy, of the cousinhood. 'It is an heirloom,' said Alderney Codd, with pride, 'in which we all have a part.' After dinner, Anthony Hamblin rose and invited his cousins to drink with him, in solemn silence, to the memory of their illustrious ancestor, Anthony, the first of the name, twice Lord Mayor of London. After this, Augustus, the second partner, proposed 'Success to the house.' No one, it might have been observed, threw more heart into the toast—which was received, so to speak, prayerfully—than young Nick, unless, indeed, it were Alderney Codd. This was at a quarter to eight. The ladies withdrew after the toasts. At about half-past eight, the twang of a harp, the scraping of a violin, and the blast of a cornet proclaimed that the younger cousins had arrived, and that dancing was about to begin.

The younger men left the table. Young Nick, who had been eating continuously for two hours and more, remained, with a

plate full of preserved fruit, for more conversation. He listened and watched. He was divided in his mind whether to grow up like Uncle Anthony, whose kindly manner illustrated the desirability of wealth; or to imitate the severity of Mr. Augustus which showed how wealth was to be guarded with diligence; or the taciturnity of Mr. William, commonly known as William the Silent, which was in its way awful, as it seemed to indicate power and knowledge in reserve. The example of Dean Hamblin, bland, courteous, and genial; that of the Colonel, brusque, short, and quick; that of Stephen, the 'Black' Hamblin, gloomy and preoccupied; and that of Alderney Codd, who assumed for this occasion only, and once a year, the manner and bearing of a wealthy man, were lost upon young Nick: he only thought of the partners.

When the gentlemen repaired to the drawing-room, young Nick brought up the rear with an expression of importance and pride twinkling in his bright eyes, and shining in his white locks, which became immediately intolerable to the boys who, by virtue of their cousinhood, assisted at the family gathering.

'Here's young Nick!' they whispered, nudging each other. 'Don't he look proud, having dinner with the gentlemen? Nick, what did you have for dessert?'

'Conversation,' replied the boy proudly, ignoring any reference to eating. 'We talked politics. After dinner, when the ladies are gone, men always talk politics. I had a good deal to say, myself.'

The weight of his superiority crushed the other boys, whose joy was dimmed not entirely by envy, but by the fact that young Nick—so called to distinguish him—held aloof from them all the evening, and joined the groups of men, with whom he stood as if he was taking part in the conversation, or at least critically listening. He danced once or twice with grown-up young ladies, to whom his conversation was marked by a peculiar *hauteur* natural to a boy who had sat out the dinner, and 'come in' with the gentlemen.

'No fun to be got out of young Nick to-night,' whispered one boy to another.

'No: remember last year, when he tied the string across the stairs, and the footman tumbled up with a tray of ices.'

'Ah!' replied the other, with tears in his eyes; 'and when he hitched the fish-hook into Mr. William's wig, and threw the line over the door, and then slammed it.'

These reminiscences were gloomy. Supper alone was able to dispel the sadness of comparison.

The second partner, Mr. Augustus, was a man who would have been more impressive had his integrity been less strongly 'accentuated,' as they say now, upon his features. As some

men bear themselves bravely, some modestly, some braggartly, Mr. Augustus bore himself honestly. He was a merchant of a severe type. For very pride, if not from principle, he was incapable of meanness. It was he who conducted the most responsible part of the business of the firm, in which he had worked for forty out of his five and-fifty years.

The third partner, Mr. William, whom we have already heard called William the Silent, was at the head of the finance. He certainly wore a wig, having had the misfortune to go bald very early in life. There was, however, no pretence about his peruque: it was impossible to mistake it for real hair. He, too, was a first-cousin; he was remarkable for a great gift of silence. Augustus was married; sons and daughters were here to-night. William was a bachelor.

There was one guest who had borne through the dinner a look of constraint, out of harmony with the pleasant faces of the rest, and who now stood before the fire looking infinitely bored. This was Stephen Hamblin—'Black' Hamblin, as the romantic among the younger cousins called him—younger and only brother of Anthony.

Although eight years younger, he appeared older. That was partly on account of his dark complexion, in which he resembled his mother, and partly by reason of his life, which had been, as the French say, stormy. Despite his complexion, he seemed at first sight strangely like his elder brother. Later on, one saw so many points of difference that it became wonderful how two brothers could be so unlike; for in Stephen's face those lines were hard which in Anthony's were soft. His eyes were set too close together, their expression was not pleasant, they were embedded in crowsfeet innumerable; the hair had fallen off the temples; he wore no beard, but a heavy moustache; his nose was long and rather aquiline. He had a gentle manner, which was perhaps assumed; he was a lamb who somehow gave one the impression that a wolf was beneath the skin. Reading his history in his face, one would say, 'This man must have been in his youth singularly handsome; his life has not been one of noble aims: he has valued at their utmost the pleasures proffered by the well-known triad; he is capable, but his ways are tortuous.'

He comes to this house and meets the cousins once a year only, on the occasion of the Hamblin dinner; he greets them all with cordiality, which is distrusted by the elder members of the family; and for the rest of the year he goes his own way seeing no one of them all, except his brother Anthony.

He calls upon him in the City, and they have a great secret which they keep almost entirely to themselves. It is none other than this, that Stephen has long since dissipated, squan-

dered, and gambled away every farthing of the fortune which he inherited, and has been for some years living on his brother's generosity. This dependence, which would be galling to some thinkers, is quite comfortable for Stephen. Who, indeed, should maintain him but his brother? It is a sacred duty; Stephen would be the last to stand between any man and a sacred duty.

If you look closely you will see that his eyes change their expression when they rest upon Alison. He does not like her.

Standing beside him is another cousin, Mr. Alderney Codd—a tall thin man about his own age. He is apparelled in a dress-coat of great age, and he wears linen considerably frayed at the wristbands and collar. His face has one salient peculiarity—it is hopeful; he looks as if he was looking for something, as indeed he always is. What he is looking for is a fortune, of which he dreams and for which he schemes all day long and every day. Meantime his sole source of income is a lay fellowship at St. Alphege's, Cambridge, obtained three-and-twenty years ago, and conferred upon him in obedience to the will of a mediæval foundress, who hoped so to advance for ever the cause of learning. In this case she has provided an annual income for a man who, but for this provision, might have done something useful to the world. It is said that the moiety of the fellowship is retained by a certain firm of lawyers, and distributed annually among a small band of once confiding persons, who have with one consent removed their confidence from Mr. Alderney Codd. He is the only member of the family who retains a kindly regard for that dubious sheep of the flock, Stephen. Perhaps in some respects their tastes are similar; certainly the honest Alderney is happier at the bar or smoking-room of the Birch-tree Tavern than in a lady's drawing-room; and the time has gone by when female beauty, save when exhibited behind that bar, might have drawn him by a single hair.

The young people are waltzing; the young fellow called Gilbert Yorke, a well-set-up handsome lad of three-and-twenty—is dancing with Alison. They can both dance; that is to say, their waltzing is smooth, cadenced, and regular; they dance as if the music made them. Alison's eyes are sparkling with pleasure; Gilbert, it must be owned, wears upon his face the expression of solemnity thought becoming to the occasion by all Englishmen who dance, even by those who dance well.

'Time was, Stephen,' said Alderney Codd, 'when you and I liked these vanities.'

'I suppose,' grumbled Stephen, 'that we have been as great fools as these boys in our time.'

'*Ehen, Postume!*' said Alderney. It was one of his peculiarities to lug in well-worn quotations from the Latin, in order

to illustrate his connection with the university. 'I wish that time would come again.'

'You were ignorant of whisky in those days, Alderney,' returned the other.

Alderney was silent, and presently, giving reins to his imagination, entered into a lively conversation with Mrs. Cridland on the responsibilities of wealth. In this atmosphere of solid and substantial prosperity he easily fancied himself to have been also born in the purple, and assumed, in spite of his frayed wristbands, the burden and sadness belonging to great riches.

Then the waltz came to an end, and the dancers strolled about in couples. People who had eyes might have concluded, from many symptoms, that the young fellow they called Gilbert Yorke—everybody knew him, and everybody called him Gilbert—was already well through the first stage of a passion, and advanced in the second. The first stage begins with admiration, goes on to jealousy, and ends in despair. The second begins with resolution, and ends—everybody knows how. It is also evident that they would make a very pretty pair. Such a pair as Heaven intended when couples were first invented, a good many years ago. He says something in a low voice; she looks up with a little light in her eyes; he says something else, and she blushes. Once, when I was young, I used to watch these scenes with envy. What was it they said to each other? What amorous epigram, what sweet poetic thought, what flower of speech, was that which brought the blush to the maiden's cheek, and kindled a light in her eye? I know none such: and it seemed to me, in those days of youthful ignorance, as if I, like Robinson Crusoe, was singled out for special misfortune, because from me these conceits of Cupid and vanities of Venus were withheld. In truth, they say nothing! There is no epigram and no conceit; only a word here and there which betrays something of the heart, and so, being understood, makes both happy. Why is not one always young? Why, since one has to die—which is a great nuisance—cannot sweet and-twenty be prolonged for a hundred years, so that when Azrael stays at our window in his fatal flight, he may summon rosy youth from a whole century of pleasant sports, tired, but not satiate? I wish some one would write a novel about a world in which everything was always young. Fancy being always young, handsome, and rich; fancy an endless succession of young and distractingly beautiful maidens—there would be, it is true, the drawback of the constant arrival of new fellows, as clever and as brave as ourselves. But the new-comers would naturally be attracted by the older—I mean the more experienced—of the ladies; while the advanced *juvenes*, those whose years were ap-

proaching ninety, would naturally fall victims to the fresh young maidens. What a world!

A happy New-year's party; a collection of youth and joy in a house where luxury, comfort, and ease seem stable, firmly rooted, and indestructible. Look at the handsome owner of this fair mansion. Saw one ever a more encouraging example of human welfare? Why, in the very age of gold itself, not a single shepherd of them all at fifty could look more completely contented with his lot, more solidly satisfied with the prospect of many years' bliss and satisfaction than Anthony Hamblin.

Yet fortune is ever fickle. Call no man happy while he lives. Even now, while we look, we may hear outside the rumble of the wheels which bear to the house, in a four-wheel cab, a messenger of woe.

'Come,' said Mr. Hamblin, 'let us have a little music. Some singing, Alison, for the New Year.'

For one thing it is good to have grown older. In the old days, if a little singing was proposed, some ambitious weakling, possessed of a thin baritone, would confidently stand at the piano, and wrestle with 'Ever of thee,' or 'Good-bye, sweetheart;' or a young lady, who mistook hard breathing for a good voice, would delight us with an aria from *Trovatore*, then in its first sprightly running. We could not treat them to the contumely with which certain critics treat hapless mortals who endeavour to depict this many-sided world in novels; that is to say, we could not tell them, as they tell these authors, the plain unvarnished truth. We could not say, 'Young lady, young sir, your singing grates upon the ear like the scratching of the finger-nail on a slate. Go in again, and stay there.' No; we had to endure in silence; and when the performance was happily concluded, we had to applaud, and grin, and say, 'Thank you, thank you!'

Now, so rapid has been the progress of art, this weak young man has almost disappeared. Part-songs and choral societies have smashed him. He knows that he cannot sing, and therefore he humbly takes his place as one among many, as he joins the audience.

When Mr. Hamblin asked for a little singing he said a few words to the professionals, who retired for supper, and Alison sat down at the piano. They asked for five minutes to recover after the dancing, Gilbert Yorke began to get out books and music, and those who were to form the audience clustered together about the fireplace, and immediately became grave of aspect. Alderney Codd, who had as much ear for music as the mock turtle, assumed for his own part a grave and critical air.

Then the singers ranged themselves about the piano—there were a dozen in all—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass; the oldest

of them was not three-and-twenty; not one of the girls was so aged as that; and as they held their music before them, and the light fell upon their fresh young faces, grave and earnest, they looked like a row of angels painted by Blake.

Then they began Barnby's glee, 'Sleep, my pretty one, sleep.'

Mr. Hamblin was standing close to the piano, facing the choir. While they were singing, a card was brought him. Alison noticed that as he read the name his face became suddenly pallid, and he dropped the card.

'Show the lady into the study,' he said.

When the glee was finished, Alison picked up the card lying at her feet. On it was the name of 'Miss Rachel Nethersole, Olivet Lodge.'

Who was Rachel Nethersole? Where was Olivet Lodge? She put the card upon the piano, and with a little uneasiness began to talk about what they should sing next.

CHAPTER III.

MISS NETHERSOLE.

THE visitor was a tall bony woman between fifty and sixty. She was dressed in black, with a thin shawl which seemed to defy the weather; she carried over her arm a black wrapper of some soft stuff. She wore black cloth gloves, and had with her a small bag.

When the footman invited her to enter the study, she snorted at him uncomfortably, and looked round her with a sort of contempt or defiance.

The study lights had been lowered; the man turned them up. A bright wood fire, with three great logs, was burning on the hearth, and threw a ruddy light over the dark old furniture. On either side stood a long and deep easy-chair; the walls were lined with books: heavy curtains hung before the windows: there were portfolios of engravings or water-colours on stands; a large cigar-box stood on a table near the right-hand chair; magazines and papers lay about. It was the study of a man who, in a desultory and rather *dilettante* fashion, turned over many pages, taking interest in many subjects, making himself master of none, yet able to follow, in some way, progress in all.

The servant invited the strange visitor to take a chair.

'No, I shall not sit down,' she replied, in a hoarse and ill-boding voice, 'in this house. I shall stand until Mr. Hamblin has heard what I have to tell him. He may sit, take his ease

in low chairs, and comfort his soul with extravagant wood fires at a shilling a log, if he can.'

The man felt that it would be bad manners to attempt any reply to so extraordinary a statement. He therefore stepped softly out of the study, and communicated to the below-stairs department the strange fact that there was an ugly customer upstairs, and that a shindy—nature and cause of the row unknown—was presumably imminent.

Had Mr. Hamblin been a notorious evil-liver, as the Prayer-book hath it, or had he been a hard man or a harsh master, there would have been no surprise, but rather the rapturous joy with which one human soul generally regards the discomfiture of another. But, for such a man, such a visitor! It was wonderful.

'Dressed in rusty black,' said Charles, describing the lady, 'with a shawl over her arm, and a white collar on. As for her face, it's like a door-scraper.'

Being reminded that the comparison was vague, conveyed no accurate idea of the lady, and verged on poetry, he tried to make himself clearer.

'Which I mean that she's got thin lips set close together, and eyes which would turn your creams sour, cook. As for her voice—well, I shouldn't wonder if the beer didn't suffer by it. We must taste it very careful to-night.'

The description was not of the exact kind which unimaginative hearers require. Yet there was the merit of truth in it. Miss Nethersole was certainly gaunt, elderly, straight, and, as Charles the footman rightly stated, possessed of thin lips, which she clasped tightly together, as if afraid that words of benevolent weakness might inadvertently drop out. Her face was long, thin, and oval; her eyes were severe, an effect produced partly by the fact that her thoughts, at the moment, were full of bitterness, and partly by their steel-grey coldness.

When she was left alone she trembled and shook.

'Give me strength,' she murmured, in mental prayer. 'It seems cruel; and yet, for my dead sister's sake—I am but an Instrument. The arm of the Lord is stretched forth to punish the unrighteous. Slow are His judgments, but they are sure.'

Five minutes passed away; then the door opened, and the man whom she sought stood before her; not with the easy, happy carelessness with which, at peace with all the world, and fearing nothing, he had been watching the dancers. Now he wore an anxious, even a frightened, look. He shut the door closely behind him, and advanced timidly, extending a hand.

'Miss Nethersole,' he said, speaking in a sort of whisper, 'what do you want with me, after these twenty years?'

She refused his hand with a gesture.

'Anthony Hamblin,' she said, setting her lips hard and firm, 'let me look at you well. Ay! The world has gone smoothly with you. No unhappiness, no care, no repentance. "Their eyes swell out with fatness."' This with an upturned glance, as if she was acknowledging the handiwork of Providence. 'You have sat at home among your garnered fruit and corn, amid your barns, saying unto your soul, "Be merry." With such as you it is often so permitted by heavenly wisdom. But only for a time—only for a brief space.'

'Have you come out on this cold winter's night, Miss Nethersole, to quote Scripture to me? At least, I see that the old fashion of speech survives.'

He spoke lightly, but he watched her face with an apprehensive look.

'I have not come out to waste the words of Holy Writ upon scoffers, of whom you, I perceive, are still one, as of old. Not at all.' She opened and closed her thin lips with a snap. 'I come here, Anthony Hamblin, as the Instrument of vengeance; long deferred, but sure.'

'Vengeance, vengeance!' muttered the man impatiently. 'What do you mean by vengeance?'

'Let me recall the past.'

'Let, rather, the dead past be forgotten,' he interrupted. 'Do you think it pleases me to revive the memory of the—the—events connected with our acquaintance?'

'I presume not. Even the most hardened criminal must sometimes shudder when he looks back and reckons up, one by one, the many downward steps in his guilty career.'

'Then,' said Mr. Hamblin, sinking into his easy-chair, 'as recalling the past is likely to be a long business, you may as well sit down and have it out in comfort. Pray take that chair opposite to me. It is late, and it is cold. Can I offer you anything?'

'I neither sit, nor break bread, in this house of sin,' said Miss Nethersole solemnly. 'I am here for a purpose. That despatched, I go as I came.'

Mr. Hamblin made no reply, but sat nursing his leg. Certainly he had little of the look of a sinner about him, except that touch of anxiety which wrinkled his ample forehead. The warm light of the fire fell upon his healthy and ruddy features, seeming to soften them still more, and to heighten the expression which was certainly exactly the opposite of that which we generally attribute to the habitual criminal. The popular idea of this monster is, that he wears perpetually a grim look, made up of despair, determination, and gloom. The actual fact, generalised by myself from observation of a good many heads seen and studied about Short's Buildings, Endell Street, is, that he has

a retreating forehead, which means low intelligence; tremulous lips, which means much bad drink; a twitching cheek, which means much bad tobacco; and a general expression of cretinism.

'Twenty years ago,' she began—he sighed—'there came to a quiet little town, called Newbury, two brothers.'

'We know exactly what happened twenty years ago, you and I,' he said. 'Let us pass over the preamble—I will take it as read—and come to the present. Why are you here? what do you threaten? what do you want of me? and what does it all mean?'

'Two brothers,' she went on relentlessly, as if unwilling to spare him one detail. 'One of them, some eight years older than the other, was about thirty-two or three. That one was you. The other, with whom I am not concerned——'

'The Devil!' said Mr. Hamblin, sitting bolt upright and staring her in the face. It was noticeable that the look of apprehension changed at these words to bewilderment.

'Not concerned,' she repeated, with an upward glance, as if she appreciated the interjection in all its sinfulness. 'The younger brother, I say, named Stephen, a wretched boy who smoked tobacco and drank beer, was about four-and-twenty. They were out together for some sort of godless holiday.'

'In the name of Heaven, Miss Nethersole, why godless? We were on a fishing tour.'

'They stayed in our town, they *said*, whatever was the truth, because there was fishing. Every day they pretended to go fishing, though I never heard that they caught any fish; and the sequel showed that they were fishers of souls, not of trout, and employed in the service of the Devil, their master.'

Mr. Hamblin uncrossed his legs, and lay back stroking his beard. He looked less anxious now, and rather amused, as if the narrative was not likely to concern him personally.

'They made the acquaintance while at Newbury'—she really was getting slower than ever—'of two maiden ladies, one of whom——'

'Was yourself, the elder of the two; the other was your sister, who was two-and-twenty years of age, pretty, attractive, and sweet. It is not for me to interrupt you by drawing comparisons between her and her sister.'

This was rude, but Mr. Hamblin was getting vexed. She only bowed, and went on:

'The younger was what the world—regardful only of the outward seeming—called pretty.' Mr. Hamblin bowed and waved his hand, as if he had already made that sufficiently plain. 'She was also, to outward seeming, a consistent Christian Walker.' Mr. Hamblin smiled. 'She was, in reality, though her friends knew it not, singularly open to temptation, and

easily led astray by the vanities, riches, and earthly loves of this sinful world——'

'Poor child!' sighed Anthony Hamblin; 'she was indeed.'

Miss Nethersole looked at him in some astonishment, mingled with regret. Hardness of heart she could face—in fact, she expected it—with unrepentant scoffs; but a contrite spirit might disarm her and rob her of revenge; she went on doubtfully, holding herself more upright.

'These two brothers, in some way or other, made the acquaintance of the ladies, and were permitted to call. They came again; they came frequently: soon there was not a day when they did not come to the house. They were received as gentlemen, not as wild wolves, observe.'

'They were,' said Mr. Hamblin gently. His sympathetic face had grown sad, and his deep eyes gazed upon his visitor with a melancholy which had nothing of the scoffing spirit in it.

'In the end,' said Miss Nethersole, 'one of the brothers fell in love with the girl.

'Perhaps both. Miss Nethersole: perhaps both of the men loved that sweetest of tender and innocent country flowers.'

'Both, if you please,' said Miss Nethersole. 'The elder sought an interview with me'—dropping into the first person—'and stated his case.'

'Clumsily,' said Anthony; 'so that you believed I was making love to you. When you found out your mistake, you took your—' revenge, he was going to say, but he altered the word—'your own course.'

'I replied,' said Miss Nethersole, 'that there could be no marriage of my sister with the worldly, and I requested that our acquaintance should cease. It did cease. The brothers called at the house no more. I do not disguise the fact that for several days there were tears, temper, and reproaches to put up with. I hope I bore these with a Christian spirit. In a short time they suddenly ceased, and I trusted that any light affection which might have been awakened had vanished already. I supposed, erroneously, that the young men had left the town. They were, however, still fishing—for souls. A week after my interview with you, both you and your brother left the town on the same day; and on that day, my sister, on the pretence of visiting an aunt at Hungerford, left my house. No one knows better than you at whose invitation she went away, and why she never came back.'

'I certainly do know,' said Mr. Hamblin gravely. 'And since we both know the facts, why repeat them? We cannot undo the past.'

'She wrote to me,' Miss Nethersole went on stolidly, 'after her departure. She said that she was happy with her hus-

band. She sent me her address, and begged my forgiveness. To all her letters I returned but one answer. I told her that she might draw upon me on the first of every January for the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds; that, I said, was all that I would do for her. It was, in fact, all that I could afford to do. I never inquired if her husband was rich or poor. I never wished to hear about her affairs again. I promised her my prayers, and I let her go.'

'You were then, as you are now, a cruel and unfeeling woman,' said Mr. Hamblin sharply.

Miss Nethersole enjoyed the momentary triumph of having roused her victim to wrath.

'Then I heard no more from her. For eight years, however, I continued to receive the draft for a hundred and fifty pounds, and to honour it.'

Mr. Hamblin started in his chair and sat bolt upright.

'For how long?' he cried.

'For eight years. Ah, you know now why I am here!'

'I know now?' he repeated, as if incredulous.

'You pretend astonishment? That is because you have been found out. Surely I am but an Instrument. The judgments are slow, but they are very sure.'

Mr. Hamblin sank back in his chair and grasped the arms as if he wanted physical as well as moral support. 'Eight years!' he gasped.

'You know what it means. Come, Mr. Hamblin, have the courage to tell me what that means.'

'It means,' he said, with white lips—'it means—forgery.'

'Forgery,' she repeated, with manifest enjoyment. 'That is exactly what it means. I kept all those drafts, never thinking what might happen. When the ninth first of January came and brought no draft, I knew that my sister was dead. I had the blinds down and went into mourning. But last week I made a discovery. I found out that my sister had been dead six years before the last of those drafts were sent me.'

Mr. Hamblin was silent.

'I made more than one discovery,' she continued. 'I learned from a safe and trustworthy source that the man, her husband, behaved to her with brutal unkindness. It was his systematic neglect, his cruelty, which hurried her, poor and frail, unfit to die, into her grave. She left behind her a kind of journal, which my informant brought to me. I have a copy here for your own private reading. You will have so little time for reading that I advise you to read it at once—to-night.'

She opened her bag and took from it a roll of paper tied round with black ribbon.

'This is a document,' she said grimly, 'which will revive

many memories for you. 'It will perhaps serve,' she added, 'to inspire you with penitential thoughts while you are enduring your punishment.'

'My punishment?' He looked up, as he took the papers, as if with a mild surprise.

'Your punishment,' she repeated firmly. 'The papers belong to the past, the punishment belongs to the future. All punishment does. The whole unending future to you if you do not repent, and to the greater part of mankind, will most certainly be one long wail of despair as you suffer your punishment. But having regard to the immediate future, I have prepared the facts with such care as my poor abilities have enabled me to bestow upon them. My lawyer, a most able and skilful lawyer, well acquainted with every point of the criminal law, has got the papers in his hands, and will—next Monday, not to-morrow, because I wish you to have two clear days for repentance—apply for a warrant for your arrest on a charge of forgery. You will be charged with six distinct forgeries, each for the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds. The forged drafts will be presented in evidence; it will be proved that the signature in each is an imitation of my deceased sister's writing. It will be proved that her death took place two years after her marriage. Portions of the journal, the evidence of the dead wife against her husband, will be read, to show that the prisoner in the dock—the wretched prisoner in the shameful dock'—she repeated this very slowly, so as to bring out and enjoy the full flavour of the words—'was as cruel as he was unscrupulous.'

She paused, while Mr. Hamblin regarded her with troubled bewilderment. 'Before taking these steps,' the woman went on, 'I made inquiries about you. I learned who and what you are—a rich merchant, respected by your friends, successful in the world, living an outwardly respectable life, with ties and connections in your home. I gathered from my cautious inquiries that such a charge against such a man would create the greatest astonishment. The higher the place, the greater the fall'

'This is like a horrible dream,' said Mr. Hamblin, pulling himself together. 'How am I to answer this woman?'

'You need not trouble about an answer to me,' she replied. 'I want no answer. The sight of you, after many years, is enough for me.'

'A cruel and revengeful woman this,' said Mr. Hamblin, for the second time.

'I see you—your sin found out and brought home to you—cowering in despair before me. Is not that answer enough? Think of the days, twenty years ago, when, in your insolent way, you laughed at the woman whom you had lured on to betray weakness——'

'Indeed I did not laugh at you. I was anxious, it is true, to let you understand clearly that I had never the least intention of making love to you.'

She shook her head. 'It is too late now,' she said. 'All is arranged. You have a little time before you in which you may pass over in mental review the things you have done, the things you have enjoyed, and the things you are going to endure. You have a few hours in which to say farewell to your life of ease and luxury, farewell to honour, farewell to friendship. Think of what you have before you: years in a convict prison; years in convict garb, on convict's fare, doing convict's work. And when you come out again, not a man in all the world to take you by the hand and call you friend! Do you tremble?'

He certainly did not. His face was pained, but not terrified. His look was troubled, but not with fear.

'Why should I tremble?' he asked, smiling. 'You believe that your case has no flaw.'

'Flaw?' she cried quickly. 'What flaw can it have? When I tell you that I have spent weeks in following it up, step by step, writing it out, getting my documents in order. Why, man, to gain more time I have even abstained from the week-day services in the chapel!'

'Really!' he murmured, smiling. 'Such devotion——'

'Miserable man!' She drew herself erect, and shook her finger with extended arm—an attitude worthy of Rachel. 'Miserable man! You are trembling on the verge of dishonour and shame! A prison's doors are opening to you! And you dare to scoff and sneer! I will have no mercy on you, because of my sister, whom you wiled away from me; because of the cruelty which killed her; because of the forgery of these drafts—you and no other! O hypocrite!'

She did not finish the sentence begun so well. Her wrath overpowered her.

'Come,' he said; 'I am wrong to take that tone with you. You are right to be angry; you are not right in one or two other points. There are things—shall I call them extenuating circumstances? No, they are facts of which you are ignorant, which make it most important that this matter should proceed no further.'

'Facts, indeed! What facts other than those I know? As if they were not sufficient!'

'They are sufficient in themselves; but there are other things. I will tell you what they are, if——'

'If what?' Because he hesitated.

'If you will destroy those—those forged drafts first. Miss Nethersole, I implore you to pause before you proceed in a case which on your side is and can be nothing else than pure revenge.

Believe me, it is a revenge which will recoil on your own head —your own, mind—in a way of which you know and suspect nothing. Destroy those forgeries, and I will tell you all.'

She stared at him, taken altogether aback by an appeal which contained a threat. Was there anything she had overlooked? No, there could be nothing. It was a miserable subterfuge to deceive her and stay further proceedings. She set her lips firm, and answered nothing.

'It is for others' sake, Miss Nethersole, that I plead. Destroy those papers. Do not confound human revenge with divine justice.'

'I am the Instrument,' she repeated, hard and stern. 'I will pursue this matter to your ruin or your death. I am appointed to this work.'

'Will nothing move you?' he asked. 'Will no assurances be believed? Miss Nethersole, I swear to you, by all that I hold most sacred, that if you take this case before a court of law you will repent, and go in mourning all the days of your life.'

'I have no choice,' she said coldly. 'As the Instrument, I do not move—I am moved.'

'I give you till to-morrow morning to think about it,' said the man. 'If I do not hear to-morrow morning that you have abandoned your purpose, I, too, must take my steps; and I venture to promise that you will never recover the surprise of those steps, and that you will rue the day so long as you live.'

'My purpose is decided,' she said. 'The way before me is very clear. What may follow after, it is not for me, a blind mortal, to inquire. I follow up this forgery to your ruin or your death.'

'To my ruin or my death,' he repeated, rising from his chair. 'So be it. You have, I believe, told me all you came to tell?'

'I have.'

'In that case, Miss Nethersole, our interview may be concluded.'

'When next I see you, Anthony Hamblin,' she said, drawing on her glove, and shutting up her black bag with a snap, 'you will be in the dock as a prisoner. I shall be in the witness-box giving evidence.'

He shook his head, and laughed. Yes; the man actually laughed, to her unbounded indignation and astonishment.

'Your revengeful spirit,' he said, 'will not have that satisfaction. Allow me to wish you good-night.'

He opened the door. As she stood for a moment in the hall, adjusting her shawl, the voices of the young singers in the drawing-room broke out fresh and clear:

'Ring out the false, ring in the true!'

'Some of those are your children, perhaps,' she said, with a malignant smile. 'The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. My sister's wrong shall be upon you and yours like a scourge of scorpions.'

She stepped out, and left him standing at the open doorway. The cold wind beat furiously upon his bare head, driving the frozen snow upon his face and great brown beard. He took no heed for a while. When he shut the door his eyes were swollen with an unwonted tear.

'Poor Alison!' he sighed. 'Poor child! Must she, then, learn all?'

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE PARTY BROKE UP.

ANTHONY HAMBLIN closed the door and sought the study again; he stood there before the fire, all the sunshine gone from his face, and sought to put the situation into words. 'Nothing like words,' he said to himself, with a wintry smile, 'for presenting the real facts, the whole truth.'

On the table lay the journal of the woman, dead twenty years ago. His hand trembled as he laid it in a drawer and locked it up, for greater safety.

'Now I must put on a bold front,' he said, 'and face them all, Stephen among the number, who know nothing and suspect nothing. How to break the thing to Alison?—with what words can I go to her and say, "Your——" I cannot do it. And it must all come out, the shameful story—it must be published in the papers; she must learn what all the rest of the world will learn. Poor Alison!—poor girl!'

The odd thing was, as Miss Nethersole had observed, connecting the fact naturally with an obdurate and unrepentant heart, that Anthony Hamblin spoke as if this thing was only to be regretted because some third person would be affected by it. Therefore, the good lady went away with an uncomfortable feeling; much as if, being an Instrument of Heaven, she had made the mistake of sticking the knife into somebody else, not the victim ordained.

The surprise and disgust of an exposed criminal she had marked in his countenance. So far that was satisfactory; but she could not observe the slightest trace of terror or remorse. The criminal looked at the crime and its consequences from an outside point of view, and dared to discuss it with her as if it

concerned some one else. This unexpected way of receiving her intelligence was exasperating. It made the Instrument the more resolved upon carrying out her revenge to the utmost extent permitted in a truly Christian land. No lamentation at all—no repentance—no terror. Why, it was as if a murderer on the way to Tyburn Tree were openly to lament the lot of another unfortunate going to be hanged beside him for the same crime.

In his study, Anthony Hamblin reflected on a new aspect of the case. There were others to consider besides Alison; there was the respectability of the family. The parent trunk had many branches, and there was not one rotten bough among them. Disgrace and shame would fall upon the name for the first time, the unhappy man reflected, through the main branch, the most respected of all, and there was no hope of averting the blow: the hard and determined face of the woman, triumphant in the prospect of her revenge, forbade that hope. The blow would fall, as she promised, on the Monday following.

Here his thoughts were interrupted by a gentle knock at the door. He started, as if it was the knock of a police constable already arrived with a warrant for his arrest, and handcuffs.

It was Alison herself: she had grown anxious about the protracted absence of her father.

'What is it, papa dear?' she asked. 'Has anything happened? See, you dropped the card of your visitor, and I picked it up—"Rachel Nethersole, Olivet Lodge." Who is Rachel Nethersole, papa? and where is Olivet Lodge?'

This is one of those critical moments which abound in life, but of which we take at the time so little heed. Had he taken the girl in his arms and told her everything—hiding nothing—the future misery might yet have been spared. But he did not. It was in the nature of Anthony Hamblin to avoid the infliction of pain even when it was most necessary and just that pain should be inflicted. He missed this opportunity.

'Miss Nethersole, Alison, is a lady whom I once knew intimately. I have not seen her for many years. She revived the memory of a very painful business which happened before ever you were born. Let us forget it, and go upstairs.'

The young men and maidens were dancing another waltz. They always do drop into continuous waltzing, these young people of the present day, unless restrained by the severer sense of their elders. Mr. Stephen Hamblin, upon whom his brother's eyes fell with a strange expression, was standing by the fire, looking into it with a dark and dour gaze, as if to justify his epithet among the ladies of the Hamblin cousinhood, the 'Black' Hamblin. Near him stood Mr. Alderney Codd, talking to one of the partners. His animated face still reflected the

consciousness of wealth. This, to a man of imagination, was difficult to avoid in a house which breathed of wealth.

'All this is nothing, Augustus,' he was saying airily. 'We who wish to increase our wealth have but to look round us, and the opportunities come of themselves. How many good things have I not chanced upon, for instance?'

Augustus Hamblin glanced involuntarily at the frayed shirt-cuffs and ragged collar of the speaker. Did he really mean it? But no one was ignorant of Alderney Codd's actual poverty.

'I look round,' he continued, cheerily, 'and watch the market. I see my opening. It may be a modest ten thousand, worth the picking-up; it may be a colossal fortune, which wants nothing but capital to start it and intelligence to direct it.'

'Ah, yes. Very true, indeed. But you must persuade your capitalist, Alderney, and you must find your intelligence.'

'The intelligence,' said Alderney, tapping his bosom, 'is here. The capitalist——' Just then Anthony came back with Alison. 'The capitalist, cousin Augustus——' He gently raised his voice.

'Another scheme, Alderney?' said Anthony, forcing a smile. 'Let us consider it in the morning.'

And then a constraint fell upon the party. Everybody saw that Anthony Hamblin, the giver of the feast, was nervous and agitated. He spoke fast, but he did not talk well. Alison watched him furtively. The mirth went out of the party, even down to the boys, who yawned and wished it was supper-time. The dancing languished; the laughter was forced; the singing lost its freshness. When supper-time came, everybody was relieved.

Two or three days later Augustus Hamblin, talking over the event that had just happened, remarked that it seemed that night as if the shadow of fate was upon his unfortunate cousin.

'I almost begin,' he said, 'to believe in prognostics, second sight, all that sort of thing. Poor Anthony became melancholy in a sudden way that night, and he never rallied. He forced himself to talk; he drank a great deal of champagne; he made a little speech; but it was impossible not to feel that there was something wrong with him. It was the impending sword, and he saw its shadow before him. At least, that is what my wife says.'

The hour for separation arrived. The guests were departing. In the conservatory still lingered a couple alone: the young man who had been hovering about Alison all the evening, and Alison herself. He was holding her hand, and his eyes, falling on the graceful head of the girl, were full of the tenderness of love newly-awakened.

'Alison!' he whispered; 'my darling, my own!'

She was silent, but she did not withdraw her hand.

'To-morrow,' he went on, 'I shall see your father. He is the kindest-hearted of men. He will not refuse his consent. Good-night.'

He pressed his lips upon her forehead hurriedly, and was gone. The host was in the hall exchanging farewells with his guests, most of whom were already gone. Gilbert Yorke waited about until there were only three left—himself, Mr. Alderney Codd, and Stephen Hamblin.

'I want to see you to-morrow,' said Anthony, sharply, to his brother. Gilbert Yorke noticed how his fingers nervously plucked at the kid glove he had taken off. 'I want to see you very particularly.'

'On business?' asked Stephen, looking at him suspiciously; 'what business?'

The only business he could think of between himself and his brother was that of borrowing money. Did Anthony propose to lend him more, and without being asked, or was he going to be mean and say ungenerous things? That, however, was unlike Anthony.

'I will call at your chambers to-morrow at three. It is most important that you should be alone.'

'Very well,' said Stephen, 'you will find me there. Good-night.' He held out his hand, but his brother turned as if he had not seen the proffered hand. Gilbert saw the action, and wondered what was meant. Everybody knew very well that the only member of the family who kept up friendly relations with Stephen was his brother.

Stephen buttoned up his coat, drew on his gloves, and stepped out into the night without a word.

There were then left only Mr. Alderney Codd and Gilbert Yorke.

'Dear me!' said Alderney, who had been looking among the coats, 'is Stephen gone? I depended upon him for a lift.' He was very thinly clad with an overcoat which would have been insufficient even for an April night. 'Which is your way, Mr. Yorke?'

'I am afraid not yours; I am going to stay at the hotel over the Common.'

'Ah! well, it is a fine night, though cold; I shall walk.' He laughed airily. He would have liked to go to the hotel too, but there were reasons why that could not be. It was unfortunate that it was only a week since he had borrowed five pounds of Anthony. 'After all,' he went on, 'a walk in this crisp and bracing air will do one good.'

Anthony interposed: 'With thin boots, Alderney? You must do nothing of the kind. Go over to the hotel with Yorke.

You are both my guests, tell the landlord. And you cannot go into the cold with that ridiculous thing. Call that an overcoat?'

'I warm myself inside with good old port,' said Alderney, the rich but eccentric.

'Anyhow,' said Anthony, 'borrow this.' He took down an ample and magnificent garment, lined with costly fur. 'You can send it back to me at the office.'

Alderney put it on, and at once became a rich man. No one but a rich man could possibly walk in such a coat.

'Take a cigar, Alderney, and a glass of brandy and water before you go.'

Alderney found both cigars and brandy in the study. He helped himself to a handful of Anthony's choicest, and a glass of stiff brandy and water, while Gilbert Yorke stayed to say a few words to Mr. Hamblin.

The brandy and water despatched—he had already got through a couple of bottles of champagne with the supper—Alderney Codd announced himself ready to go.

'An excellent coat,' he said, with warm approbation, while he buttoned it up. 'I shall get one exactly like it for my own use'—it only cost about a hundred and fifty guineas, being lined with the very best of skins—'black, too, in case of sudden mourning.'

Ominous words, he recollected afterwards.

Meanwhile Gilbert Yorke had timidly taken the first step of the accepted lover.

'May I see you, Mr. Hamblin,' he stammered, 'about—a—a matter most important to myself?'

Anthony smiled. Then, as if a painful thought had struck him, his face suddenly became overcast.

'Come on Sunday,' he said. 'No—no—make it Tuesday, if you still feel inclined to say what I suppose you wish to say.'

'Your words, sir, give me hope.' The words might be hopeful, but the face was very far from showing any of the cheerfulness we associate with the emotion of hope.

'Hope?' he echoed. 'Yes—have hope. Everybody may have hope—except myself.'

'What could he mean?'

The door closed upon the two last guests.

Mr. Hamblin stood irresolutely in the hall.

Then he became aware that young Nick was there too, looking attentively at him from his white lashes and pink eyes.

'You not gone to bed, boy?' he asked, with a guilty feeling that this boy, too, must learn the dreadful story.

'No, uncle; I wished to see you before I went to bed. You're not well. You've got something wrong somewhere. Confide in me. Let me advise.'

'Nonsense, boy,' said Anthony, smiling. 'Go to bed at once.'

'If there is to be no confidence, as between man and man,' said young Nick, grandly, 'there is no more to be said. Remember, however, that I offered my advice. It's no fault of mine if you won't take it.'

Mr. Hamblin retreated to his study. The footman turned down the lights in the hall, and the house was silent. But there was one more interruption. It was Alison. She had on a long white dressing-grown; her bare feet were thrust into slippers, worked in some soft woollen stuff; her long black hair was hanging over her shoulders: she looked like the dream of some great painter—a perfect maiden.

'Papa,' she said, throwing her arms round his neck, 'I cannot sleep, and I have come to tell you——'

'What, my dear? Suppose I guess already.' He drew her more closely to him, and kissed her forehead.

She burst into tears.

'Why, Alison, why?'

'It is happiness, papa. I am too happy, to have so much love. Good-night again, dear.'

Ominous tears, she thought afterwards.

CHAPTER V.

THE JOURNAL OF A DESERTED WIFE.

Anthony Hamblin was left alone with the manuscript.

He sat down in his easy-chair, and, from force of habit, took a cigar from a box which contained many kinds of cigars. But he did not light it. Instead, he took the manuscript in his hand and held it irresolutely, as if he was afraid of it.

In fact, he was afraid of it. He was about to reopen a chapter in his life which he fondly hoped, and had hoped for twenty years, was closed for ever.

There hung over the mantel-shelf the portrait of a lady. It was the same lady whose *effigies*, taken in her younger days, we have seen in Alison's room, the Señora; but this portrait figured her in her later years, when trouble had fallen upon her. The black eyes, the black hair, was with her still; but the look of confidence was gone: and in place of the possibilities of love, passion, jealousy, tenderness, wrath, in the portrait of her younger days, there was seen an expression of sadness, wonder, and resignation. The deep black eyes of the portrait met those of her son Anthony; and as he looked into them, their sadness

grew deeper, their wonder more marked, their resignation more troubled.

As the chief of the house of Hamblin sat there, looking in that face, there passed across his brain, in a few moments, as happens in great crises of life, the events belonging to many generations and many years.

There was once a certain Anthony Hamblin who, in the seventeenth century, when Englishmen first began to trade with the marvellous East, was sent out to India on board a merchantman as supercargo. In this capacity he made several voyages and no little money; when he had made enough money and plenty of friends he established himself in London as an indigo merchant. He prospered greatly. His son, Anthony the second, equally prudent and equally able, prospered also: his grandson, Anthony the third, prospered. The house grew and increased continually. The eldest son, Anthony always succeeded as principal partner; the junior partners were taken from the cousins; the younger sons sought their fortunes elsewhere. Some of them succeeded, and some failed. Whether in success or failure, they were proud of their race. The poorer branches, especially, regarded the regnant Anthony in the light of Providence, as much to be approached by prayer and as uncertain. When their case was decided on its actual merits, they were wont to curse him altogether.

If Anthony Hamblin thought of the origin, the respectability, and the position of the house, it was in contrast with this danger of disgrace which now threatened it. And thus his thoughts carried him to scenes of his own life. Far back first, to the time when he was a boy of ten.

A day in summer: a garden—the very garden on which his study-windows looked: a lady leading by the hand a little child of two.

'You must never forget, Anthony,' said the lady—his heart sank, as he recalled the sweet foreign accent and the soft voice in which his mother spoke—'You must never forget that little Stephen is your younger brother. He will look to you for an example: no one lives for himself alone: as the elder brother governs himself, so will the younger imitate him.'

The little child, a dark, almost a swarthy child, held up both his arms, and Anthony carried him, running and singing, round and round the garden.

Or, ten years later. He was twenty years of age and already in the house, learning by slow degrees to get a grasp over the working of a great firm. His father one morning received a letter addressed to him in the City, which agitated and distressed him. He sent for Anthony and showed it to him.

'Go, Anthony,' he said. 'Take the boy away: remove him

at once to another school. But never let his mother know why he was taken away.' He remembered how reports followed each other of his brother's misconduct at the new school. He was the model bad boy, the awful example. He never learned anything, never showed himself open to the influences of emulation, admonition, or example. Anthony kept back what he could from his father, and everything from his mother. The worst part of the business was that Stephen was unpopular among the boys themselves. Now boys are always ready to admire a plucky breaker of rules, so that there must have been something which did not appear in school reports.

His father died while Stephen was still at school.

Then Anthony remembered another and a more touching death-bed, when the mother, clinging to him, implored him with tears never to desert his brother; always, whatever he did, to pardon him; always to help him.

'I have known more than you thought, my dear,' she said. 'You hid things from me which others told. He has begun badly—oh! very badly. But he is young. O son of mine who never gave my heart a stab—God bless you!—he is young, and may reform.'

Then Anthony remembered the promise, sacred by the memory of his mother's last tears, which he solemnly pronounced.

There was another scene. It was in the house, in Great St. Simon Apostle. His partners came to him one morning. They were grave and embarrassed. One of them, with words of hesitation, told him a story. The elder brother, left alone, sent for the younger.

'You must leave the house,' he said. 'After what has been done, you can look for no employment from my partners. All that can be done is for you to go away, knowing that silence will be kept. Take money, and when I see you again, in a month's time, tell me what you propose to do.'

He was getting nearer to the present.

He remembered then how Stephen, who had become nominally an indigo broker, received on obtaining his majority his portion, and how this provision, ample for a younger brother, vanished in two or three years, so that he presently returned to his elder brother and to his profession.

And then his thoughts leaped over ten years, and he saw himself—whom all the world considered a bachelor, and confirmed in that happy condition of life—bringing home a girl of ten, and confessing that the world had been deceived, for lo! he was a widower, and this was his daughter Alison, whose mother had died in childbirth. He smiled as he thought of the mystery with which the cousinhood surrounded the affair, and

talked for days, even nine times nine, about it: how they came and petted little Alison, and tried to pump her; and how Stephen's face dropped and his dark eyes glowered when he heard the news, because he was no longer heir.

'That was something like a surprise,' thought Anthony, 'the mystery of the good boy. Had it been Stephen, no one would have wondered. But for the good boy of the family! And here'—he opened the manuscript—'here awaits a greater surprise still. Cousins mine, how *will* you look on Monday evening, when the paper reports Rachel Nethersole's application for a warrant?'

He spoke bitterly, but there was still a marked absence of what the good Rachel so much wished to see—terror.

The manuscript was not very bulky, and it was written all in one hand, a woman's hand of the Italian style. He knew it for the handwriting of Rachel Nethersole, and groaned as he looked at it.

'To think that she once thought I was in love with her—with her,' he said, smiling; 'why, she was always as grim and as repulsive as she is now, or very nearly; nobody *could* fall in love with such a woman. Poor Rachel! she is happy: she is going to have her revenge.'

He lighted the cigar which had been lying on the table, and sat down to what seemed a philosophic endurance of the revenge.

The manuscript was headed with the words 'My Story.'

'It is right,' the paper began, 'that you should know how I found out the exact date and the circumstances attendant on the death of my murdered sister—by what providential guidance I was led to the discovery, and so have been enabled to put together, piece by piece, the indictment which will be the means of your punishment upon this earth.'

Mr. Hamblin nodded his head, took the cigar out of his mouth, and leaned back, considering. Presently he went on with the reading.

'In October last I was laid up, having been all my life singularly strong and healthy, with a severe cold, which gradually took the form of some pulmonary complaint, the nature of which concerns you not at all.'

'What I dislike about this style,' said Anthony to himself, 'is, that it takes such a devil of a lot of words. Why couldn't she begin by saying that she had a bad cough?'

'After many visits from my medical adviser, and much fruitless expense, I was advised to try a visit to a southern seaside place, where I was to pass the winter.

'It is not my custom to travel from place to place, especially when the pulpit privileges are uncertain; I therefore took

counsel of my pastoral guide, before deciding on the place where I was to seek bodily health.

'We discussed several places. Brighton, which was proposed by the doctor, was immediately rejected as too worldly: St. Leonards and Hastings, Worthing and Southsea, for the same valid reason, were also rejected: Torquay, which in respect of climate seemed to offer exceptional advantages, proved unworthy on closer investigation. It seemed as if I should be unable to leave my own home without peril to higher considerations than those of mere health. At last, however, my adviser recommended me to think of Bournemouth. You understand that the place was not suggested by myself at all. The suggestion *came to me* from the outside. This was the first link in the chain of evidence which proves that I am an Instrument.

'Accordingly, I went to Bournemouth.

'Before going, I wrote to a house agent, to whom I had been recommended (this is link number two), and received from him a choice of lodgings, any one of which, he said, would seem to suit me well. Observe that I took no personal action in the matter. I was driven to Bournemouth: I was led to this house agent: I was guided to my lodgings.

'Those that I selected were a first floor, front and back, for myself, and a second floor back for Jane, whom you may, or may not, remember. It is Jane's privilege to consider herself working under me as also an Instrument. Why should not servants be chosen as well as mistresses? The rooms were kept by a Mrs. Peglar, a church member in the Baptist Connection, who, though exorbitant in her charges, appeared to be clean and respectable.

'Bournemouth is a dull place, especially when one cannot go outside the door in rainy weather. It rained every day, and in consequence I was compelled to remain in the house. As I was never given to the frivolous and vain fashion of reading novels to pass the time, holding, as I do, the opinion that one's own responsibilities are quite enough to occupy one's whole attention without engaging upon those of others, I found the hours between breakfast and dinner, dinner and tea, tea and supper, sufficiently long. Jane is never good at conversation, and besides was now torn from all those scenes which in Newbury furnished her with subjects of thought and topics of talk; because, if she looked out of doors, she knew nobody, not even the butcher's boy or the milkman, with whom she could exchange a word of news. I therefore fell back upon Mrs. Peglar and her experiences.

'These, spiritually, were interesting, as such experiences usually are. I imparted mine to her, and we communicated to each other certain tracts, which seemed to each to suit the case

of the other. I may say that mine, which bore upon the honesty due by Christians to those of the household, produced no effect upon the next week's bill, in which the overcharge for coals, candles, firewood, and such trifles as salt and pepper, was unworthy of a Professed Church Member. However, this, to a man of your spendthrift habits, will appear irrelevant.'

'Dear me!' sighed Anthony, laying down the paper. 'This is very dreary reading.'

'Having exchanged spiritual experiences, we proceeded to talk about things temporal. Mrs. Peglar has had trials out of the common. It is nothing in Bournemouth for lodgers to die, because most of them go there for that purpose, and when (speaking as a lodging-house-keeper) you have got a good invalid in the place, one who pays his way without too many questions and lasts a long time, you are much better off than when you get a mere healthy family down for the summer holidays. "Give me," said Mrs. Peglar, very justly, "give me a good long consumption." She was good enough, it is true, to make an exception in favour of persons like myself, which may have been sincere, as between Church members, or may not.

'We talked a good deal, having nothing better to do, over the stories of these lodgers. Mrs. Peglar's experience in the last days and weeks of dying people is very great. Her manner of describing them is powerful; if she seems sometimes to lack sympathy, it must be remembered that, like the doctor, her interests are concerned in keeping them alive. And I confess to sympathising with Mrs. Peglar, when she declared to me that most of the lodgers who died in her rooms did so from sheer cowardice and want of determination. "I said to them," she declared to me; "I told them every day that what they wanted was to pluck up—to have a good heart; oysters and a good heart. None ever died of consumption and decline yet, till they got tired of fighting." She considers that this lack of courage, which might be remedied by careful education, has cost her hundreds of pounds already. And she rightly pointed out what a dreadful loss this makes in the aggregate every year, "when you come to consider what a many lodging-house-keepers there are in the different watering-places in England."

Thus tales of her defunct lodgers occupied all our evenings; and at night my mind used to run upon the memories of the poor creatures who had died in the bed in which I lay, so that at last I was obliged to have a bedroom candle alight all night, while Jane grew nervous to such a degree—thinking of ghosts while I thought of souls—that nothing would do but the maid of all work must sleep with her as a protection.

'Naturally, Mrs. Peglar's experiences began with last year,

and went back, year by year, until we arrived at a period twenty years ago, and one morning she said to me :

' " And now I have got to tell you about my beautifullest patient of all—the poor young lady that died in your very bed one and twenty years ago."

' I had by this time heard so many stories of dying lodgers, that the announcement did not at the moment awaken any sympathy. You will perceive, in a moment, how much it interested me, after a while. She told me—I spare you her own account, which was lengthy and full of digressions—that exactly twenty years before last October, as near as she could recollect, a young lady, looking not more than twenty two or so, was brought to her house by a gentleman. The lady, who wore a wedding-ring, called the gentleman Anthony, or dear Anthony. He called her Dora, or dear Dora. Their name was Hamblin. She was very weak, and unable to speak much or sit up. The gentleman was unremitting in his attentions, watched by her side all the day, left her only at night, and anticipated all her wants. Her face was shrunken (Mrs. Peglar said) as if she had suffered a good deal : and her mind was wandering. She could not recollect what had happened the day before, but talked a good deal about things that had happened long ago. Her talk was rambling, but it was full of Rachel, Stephen, and Anthony. Sometimes she would look wildly about the room and cry, " Oh ! where is he ! where is he ! What have I done that he does not come to me ?" and then the gentleman would take her hand and soothe her, and say, " Hush, Dora dear, I am here—I am here." Then she would lay back her poor head on the pillow and go to sleep.

' Recall the memory of that time, and of your victim, and let it be upon your conscience as a red hot iron upon the flesh.

' Mrs. Peglar, seeing that I was interested, went on to tell me what you know : how there was no chance from the beginning ; how her head never grew quite right, but kept wandering as if her husband was away from her, while he—meaning you, Anthony Hamblin—was by her bedside. For three weeks she lay on her bed of death ; and one morning, being still in the same brain-cloud, still wondering why her husband did not come to her, still hoping to see him once more before she died, if only to say that she forgave him and prayed God to forgive him, she suddenly and unexpectedly passed away.

' Mrs. Peglar said that Mr. Hamblin behaved in a most liberal and generous manner. He gave her everything that the deceased possessed except a ring and a bundle of letters. She was buried in Bournemouth churchyard, where a marble cross, with her initials and the date of her death, was put up by his orders to mark her grave.

'While Mrs. Peglar continued her narrative I said nothing, except to ask a question or two by way of keeping her to the point, and preventing her from mixing up one deceased lodger with another, as one is naturally apt to do who has to look after a succession of consumptives.

'At this point, however, I interrupted her, and asked what the deceased lady had left behind her, and if Mrs. Peglar had any of the things still in her possession. She said that they were principally clothes, long since worn out; but that there was a small desk in which were a watch and chain, a locket, a bracelet, and a few other gauds of like nature, with some sort of a journal, or diary. She had kept the jewellery, she said, intending to sell it when she might be in want of the money. The rainy day had never yet arrived, and the things were with her still. Mark the hand of Providence. The prosperity of Mrs. Peglar was continued in order that I might bring this sin home to you.

'I asked her to let me see the things. She went away, and presently returned with a little writing-desk. Of course I knew already who the dead woman was, but I preserved my calmness. I confess, however, that the sight of the writing-desk gave me a shock. It was one I had presented to Dora years before as a reward for some school-girl successes; a little desk in rosewood, with velvet face when you opened it. As I took it in my hands, the memory of the past came back to me in a full flood, so that for a space I could not speak.

'Within the desk were the things of which she had told me. The watch and chain had also been a present from myself. The bracelet and locket, I suppose, were from you. There was a packet of papers tied round with green ribbon. "It is her journal, poor soul," said Mrs. Peglar. There was, I knew, a little secret drawer in the desk—there generally is in these things—I pressed a spring and it came out. Within were two portraits, one of myself, and the other—not of you, as I expected. I took that of myself, and showed it to Mrs. Peglar. It was a small portrait in water-colour, at least five-and-twenty years old, taken when the cares of this life had not yet hardened my features. "Of whom does this remind you, Mrs. Peglar?" I asked, holding it up. She recognised it immediately, and cried out that it was the very image of me; adding expressions of wonder and astonishment natural to the situation, and clothed in language common among people in her rank in life. "It *is* a likeness of myself, Mrs. Peglar," I said. "That unfortunate young lady was my sister; that wretch who hung over her death-bed was her husband, the man who induced her to leave her happy and Christian home to become the wife of a worldling." She stared at me in amazement. Presently she remarked that if I pleased

I was quite welcome to the portraits and to the papers; but as to the jewellery, that was all her own, given to her by the husband of the poor lady. I reassured her on this point. I even offered to buy the watch and chain, and the desk, leaving her the things which came from you.

'My own astonishment was so great, that for some time I did not realise the deception which had been practised upon me. Nor was it until next day, when I stood in the cemetery beside her grave, and read the date of her death, that it suddenly came upon me, like a thunderclap, that I had been robbed, for six long years, of a hundred and fifty pounds a year.'

Here Anthony Hamblin laid down the paper, and stroked his beard.

'Ay,' he murmured. 'There is the rub. We might get over most things, but forgery—forgery is a deuced awkward matter. You *can't* get over forgery.'

Then he resumed his reading.

'I think there is nothing more left to tell you,' the manuscript went on.

'The moment I realised this robbery, I perceived, being at that moment by the grave of my sister, that I was clearly pointed out and selected to be the Instrument of wrath. Because I had in my safe at home every one of those receipts for a hundred and fifty pounds each, with poor Dora's signature forged on seven of them. There was a clear road open to me, a road which led me directly and without trouble to the punishment of evil-doers and the retribution due to myself and the memory of my sister. Standing beside that grave, I firmly resolved that nothing, no tears, no repentance, no protestation, should stay my purpose. It was not revenge that I sought; it was the execution of a punishment in which I was to be the chief Instrument.

'Having read so far, you may now, Anthony Hamblin, read the journal of your victim. It is a copy of the original, which is reserved to be read aloud in public, and to be quoted in all the papers at your trial.'

'I wonder,' said Anthony, irrelevantly, 'that she did not consult the register of deaths. I rather wish, on the whole, that she had.'

He laid down the manuscript, and fell a-thinking.

After a space, he took it up again, and resumed his reading. The house—it was two o'clock in the morning—was so quiet that he could hear the clock in the hall, and its steady ticking jarred upon his ears. Outside, the wind had risen, and whistled among the branches in the trees. He looked about him nervously, as if the room was haunted.

Then he began to read the second part of the manuscript.

It was a copy, still in the same Italian hand, and a less voluminous document than the first.

It was headed, 'Fragments of a Journal found among my sister's papers.'

'I wonder,' said Anthony, 'what the poor girl found to write about, and how I came to leave the papers behind.'

There were no dates at all; and the journal, such as it was, ran on in unconnected paragraphs.

'It is very lonely here,' it began; 'I sit, or walk, or read, chiefly by myself. The daughter of the lodging-house-keeper, a girl about my own age, is kind, and sometimes bears me company. But for her, I think I should go mad.

'My husband wrote to me yesterday. He is still in London, and says that his affairs keep him there. Why cannot I, too, go to London, and stay with him?'

'I have been sitting on the shingle at the bottom of Stair Hole all the morning. The wind was high, outside the rock, and the waves came tearing through the vaulted passage between the cove and the sea as if they were mad to tear down the rock and to get at me. I was frightened at last, and went back home, where Eliza was waiting for me, with dinner.

* * * * *

'It is nearly the end of my second year of married life. What life! He never comes now: he has not seen me for six months: he says nothing about coming any more. Always business: always some excuse. If it were not for one thing, I should go mad.

* * * * *

'I have written again, and asked, for the ninth time, why I cannot go to London and live hidden there, if I must be hidden? Why should I be hidden? why should my husband be ashamed of me? Yet he replies that family reasons prevent him from acknowledging his marriage; that he has to consider his brother who must not know anything about it, and his mother who has other views for him. I suppose that the daughter of a dissenting tradesman would not please Mrs. Hamblin for her son's wife. Yet I think I could overcome even that prejudice if I had a fair trial. I suppose I must have patience. But why does he not come down to see me? It is only four hours from London. He might come, if he cared for me, if but from Saturday to Monday.

'But he does not care for me any longer. Each letter is colder and harder. If I think of it, I seem to remember that every day, while we were together, saw him become colder and more indifferent. Did he ever love me at all?

* * * * *

'It is now five months since he has seen me, and three weeks since he has written to me. I have not told him—I do not dare to tell him—what is going to happen. I dread to think of what he will say. Already he says he must reduce the allowance of three guineas a week to two, and that I had better content myself with one room instead of having both a bedroom and a sitting-room. Was it for this that I gave up my home, and ran away from Rachel?

* * * * *

'I have been ill, and have consulted the doctor. He says that I live too much alone, and that my nerves are giving way. He has prescribed iron, but says that my husband ought to come down and see me oftener. I was afraid to tell him that he has not seen me for six months. I have written to him, and told him what the doctor says. But I have not told him—what I have kept a secret. That shall be a surprise for him. If he is pleased, I shall be happy. If he is angry and discontented, I have made up my mind what to do—I will go back to Rachel, and tell her all. She will forgive me, in spite of what she wrote.

'My husband has written me another letter, colder and more cruel than any he has ever sent me before. He upbraids me with bringing him into poverty, says that he cannot any longer support the expenses of a wife, and tells me that I must look about for work of some kind to do. Work!

'If only he knew what chance there is of my being able to do any work! Has he a heart at all—this man, whom once I loved? Does he remember? Do men's words and promises mean nothing at all? Do they think that women can be taken up, petted for a week, and then thrown aside? If I dared, I would go to Rachel at once. But I do not dare. Let me wait, if I can, for a few weeks yet—till my story is complete.

* * * * *

'I have been very ill indeed, they tell me. My husband has written me another cruel and peremptory letter. He can no longer afford me more than a guinea a week, and I am in debt already to doctor and to landlady. What shall I do? What shall I do?'

* * * * *

'Anthony has come. It was a thought inspired surely by my Heavenly Father, which prompted me to ask him to forgive all—to forget it, if he could, and to come to my help. He has come. He forgives me everything. Oh, how have I sinned towards him! and yet I hardly knew it in my blind infatuation. He has come—come like an angel from heaven, bringing gifts of love and forgiveness with him. I am almost happy. I shall

never want for sympathy and love any more, now that I have Anthony to take care of me.

* * * * *

'I am moved out of the one room in which I had taken refuge. I am lying on a sofa in the best room of the house. Anthony is inexpressibly thoughtful and kind to me. There is nothing for me to do now, but to wait in patience. He reads to me; anticipates my smallest wish; calls for me; treats me just as he used to in the dear old days, like a little child whose moods are of no account except as an amusement. How sweet it is! The time slips backwards, and sometimes I think I am still at Olivet Lodge, playing, in too much happiness, sometimes with Anthony, and sometimes with Stephen, and waiting for Rachel to come and scold me for laughing. Poor Rachel! She thinks that all laughter must be turned into mourning.'

* * * * *

This was the last, the very last, of the entries.

When Anthony Hamblin laid down the paper, his tears were flowing freely. He sat gazing into the decaying embers, while he cried like a girl.

'Poor Dora!' he said. 'Poor, neglected flower! It was right that a time should come for punishment, I confess it. And yet, for Alison's sake, that punishment should be averted. Thank Heaven! I have still time. I have Saturday and Sunday before me; a great deal may be done in forty-eight hours. Rachel, I think your victim will escape you yet!'

CHAPTER VI.

TO HIS RUIN OR HIS DEATH.

When, next morning, Anthony Hamblin appeared in the breakfast-room, his daughter, for the first time in her life, realised that her father might some day grow old. For he looked already ten years older.

A single sleepless night, the trouble into which he had fallen, the memory of that tearful journal, the revival of so sad and terrible a death-bed, had already stamped his eyes with crows-feet and drawn a line across his forehead.

'My dear,' cried the girl, 'are you ill? Is it still the trouble of last night?'

'Always the trouble of last night,' he said, kissing her. 'Give me a day or two to shake it off, if ever I can.'

She poured out tea for him, and he made a pretence at breakfast, but his hand shook, and his appetite failed.

Presently he rose abruptly and went into his study; here he sat down and took up the thread of his thought at the point where dressing and breakfast had interrupted him.

He was to see his brother at three; before then—or should it be after? perhaps better before—he would see his lawyers. Yes, better before. Then he could go to his brother with that sense of strength, consolation, or hope, which a talk with a lawyer always confers upon a man.

Then he thought of that woman with hard face and revengeful eyes. Was the spirit of wrath in her wholly due to her sister's wrongs, and not at all to the memory of that unlucky mistake when she took his pleadings on behalf of Dora for honest wooing addressed to herself? Perhaps, he thought, with a smile, there was something of the *spretæ injuria formæ*. He pictured to himself the application before the magistrates, the charge, the trial, the excitement among his acquaintances, the consternation of his friends, and lastly, the sorrow, shame, and agony of Alison.

'It was for this,' he said, 'that I brought her up in ignorance and in happiness. Now she must learn all, and who will tell her, and in what language will it be told?'

Alison would not leave him long undisturbed. She broke in upon his study, and tried to lead his thoughts in a happier direction. She was so happy herself in the conscious possession of her new secret—shared at present with no other than Gilbert himself—that her father's disquietude jarred upon her.

'Papa,' she said, standing before him just as, long before, she used to stand and repeat poetry, with her hands behind her, and depths of wisdom in her steadfast eyes—'papa, can you say begone dull care, for a little half-hour, and let me talk to you?'

'Talk, my dear,' said her father; 'give me your hands—both of them.' He took one in each of his, in his fond caressing way. 'Talk to me till dull care flies away of her own accord. If you cannot drive her away, no one can. Forgive me that I am so moody. Now tell me, did you have a pleasant party last night?'

She shook her head, and turned rosy red.

'I do not want to talk about the party, but about something else. Papa, did—did Mr. Yorke speak to you last night?'

Anthony Hamblin remembered.

'He is to speak to me to-morrow, after church—no, on Tuesday.'

She threw her arms round his neck, and sat upon his knees, whispering:

'It is—about me, papa.'

He kissed her, and said nothing for a while.

'Gilbert Yorke is so old a friend, my dear, that you know what I think. Tell me of yourself: Do you think that you can love him—quite in the right way, I mean—with respect and admiration?'

'I am sure I can, papa.'

'His people are proud of their family—if they should object—should anything be discovered——'

What did he mean, as he spoke in a disconnected way? What were his thoughts?

'Why, dear,' said Alison, laughing, 'our family is as good as Gilbert's, I should think. Are we beginning to be ashamed of old Anthony Hamblin's first indigo venture?'

Her father recovered himself.

'Why, no,' he replied. 'It was not of that I was thinking—not at all. Well, Alison child, you will have your own way, I hope, though at present I don't see how. But what shall I do without you? I think I shall give you up this house to yourselves, and ask for a couple of rooms at the top, where I can stay and watch you.'

More they talked in this same light fashion, behind which lay those depths of affection and feeling which we English people love to keep hidden, happy in knowing that each by each they are divined and known, and account is taken. Pass it over. Remember only that every word spoken by the girl sank deep into the heart of the father.

This talk lightened for awhile the trouble which lay at the man's heart. He half forgot the interview which he was to have with his solicitor at two, his brother at three, and the magistrates on Monday morning. He was a man who could easily forget. Those who suffer greatly and quickly, through the ill deeds of themselves or others, have not uncommonly this compensating gift of forgetfulness.

The girl grew happier in seeing the cloud roll away from her father's face. It was, to be sure, a most unaccustomed cloud—almost the first she had ever seen upon that contented brow. Not quite the first, because Uncle Stephen had more than once occasioned an evening of gloom.

Then that unlucky inspiration, which some philosophers call the Devil, entered into Alison's mind. She should have stayed with her father; she should have watched beside him, chased the spirit of gloom from his mind, enabled him to look things in the face, and confront the inevitable with courage. Unluckily she thought that exercise would do him good, and ordered him to go out.

'Take your skates,' she said in her peremptory way, 'and go

on to the Mount Pond. I will come after you presently, and we will skate all the morning.'

He obeyed, and left the house with the usual smile on his lips and in his kindly eyes. Alison watched him as he crossed the lawn, walking, in spite of his fifty years, with the elasticity and spring of youth.

'Why,' sighed Alison, 'should there not be a country where we could send such relations as Uncle Stephen into distant exile, with plenty to eat and nothing to do? It should be called Prodigal Son Land.'

Then her eyes fell upon the manuscript which her father had left upon the table. On the right-hand corner were written the words 'Private and Confidential.' She rolled it up, and took it into her own room, where she locked it up in a drawer.

It was not much that Alison knew of the wickedness of the world, but that little she had accustomed herself, somehow, to connect with her Uncle Stephen. The pomps and vanities of this wicked world, the pride of the eye, and all the rest of it, were mere phrases of empty sound to this innocent and simple girl—represented something outside her own world in which her father had no part or share. As whatever vexation came to the house seemed caused by her uncle, it was not unnatural that he should become her ideal of the wicked man who turneth not away from his wickedness: and therefore, on this occasion, she assumed, without right or reason, that Uncle Stephen had been doing something more than usually wicked.

Outside the house, Anthony Hamblin set off at a brisk walk to the Mount Pond, where he was to be joined by his daughter. The Common was covered with snow, and the turf was crisp and hard. The furze-bushes seemed to be huddling together, in spite of their prickles, for warmth beneath their white covering. The sky was clear and bright overhead, but in the south there was mist and the sun shone like a burnished disk. The snow rounded off the roughness of the old Common.

Anthony walked on cheerfully, brushing away the snow and swinging his skates as he went. For the moment he had forgotten the dreaded appointment with his brother. He would spend the morning on the ice, and strengthen his nerves with exercise. He came to the Mount Pond, crowded with skaters, and stood there awhile watching. Suddenly his cheerfulness vanished, and his heart sank within him. He remembered a day—long ago, thirty years ago—when he had stood, then still a youth, beside his mother, and watching one boy skating among the rest, the handsomest of them all. He remembered the mother's pride; he remembered how she pressed his arm, and whispered that she thanked God for both her sons. Then he could bear the place no longer, but turned away, sad and sorry,

and walked from the pond and the Common, still carrying his skates.

He forgot that Alison was coming to skate with him; he forgot everything except that he had to see his solicitor and reveal things to him which would cover himself with shame and that respectable adviser with astonishment. He did not look about him, but wandered mechanically along roads and streets.

Presently he remembered that time must be getting on: he looked at his watch—it was only half-past eleven. Yet in his thoughts he had lived over again every year of his life since he left the Common. Half-past eleven—what could he do to pass the time before two?

He looked around him: he was at Victoria; he had walked all the way from Clapham Common to Victoria without knowing it; he could not even remember by what streets he had come.

'After all,' he said, 'perhaps I am a fool to distress myself so much. We shall manage to square it.'

A strange thing to say, considering what it was that was hanging over his head. Then he pulled himself upright and walked along with a brighter air. Presently, he found himself at Hyde Park Corner, and followed in the stream of people which was pouring into the Park, most of them carrying skates.

'Alison said I was to skate,' he murmured; 'I will, though on the Serpentine instead of Clapham Common.'

The Long Water and the Serpentine were crowded. There were skaters who plunged and struck out, and splashed about with arms and legs, bending low forward and making little headway; there were men who wore the old-fashioned skate with projecting curve and straight heel, the Dutch skate—these men, with long stroke and easy roll of the body, swung swiftly down one side of the water, and returned in the same way up the other; there was the skater who could do anything on the ice that science can teach or skill contrive; there was the young fellow who imitated him, but failed to catch his ease and missed his grace; there were the girls who were learning, trying not to fall, and burning to move easily and gracefully; there was the girl who really could skate, and looked like enjoying it; there were her young sisters taking first lessons, and tumbling about like little kittens; there was the rough with his pals, uneasily conscious that the eyes of many policemen were about; there were shoals of schoolboys, and thousands of those men and women of the lower classes who never seem to have anything to do, who crowd the parks with equal readiness for a parade, a drawing-room, a review, the arrival of a distinguished visitor, or the rare occasion of the ice proving strong enough to bear.

A mighty mob it was, but a good-humoured mob. And the banks were as crowded as the ice. All along the edge were rows of the men who turned the nimble penny by screwing on skates, lending chairs, and other useful arts. Then there were the men of the Royal Humane Society, ready with boats, ladders, and drags: they had a tent in one place with a fire in it, and crafty restoratives for those who might have the ill hap to tumble in. Standing before this tent was a man known to Anthony. He was neatly and serviceably dressed, in boots up to his hips, and a beautiful doublet or overcoat of cork.

'Good-morning, sir,' he said, touching his hat. 'Going on, like the rest of 'em?'

'I don't know,' said Mr. Hamblin.

'Better have a turn, sir,' said the man; 'the weather is on the turn. This is the last day, belike. Give me your heavy coat; I will take care of it for you. There's no wind, and you'll be all the better without it.'

Anthony complied. He took off the heavy overcoat, and gave it to the man, who laid it over a chair at the door of the tent.

'There, sir, it's quite safe with me. You'll find me here when you come off.'

Anthony Hamblin left him and strolled down to the water's-edge. Again another sinking of the heart, another strange fit of irresolution and fear. He *could* not go on the ice. He could do nothing except think.

'Poor Alison!' he said for the fiftieth time. 'That which she thought would be her happiness will only bring her greater misery. How shall she escape? What can I do to save her from this blow? Any way, any way,' he repeated drearily. 'Because whatever I do, whether I speak or whether I hold my tongue, that woman means to go on. She intends revenge. And her revenge means unhappiness to Alison. How if I were to write and tell the poor girl all? But that would only precipitate things. No; there is nothing left but to go to Stephen—he must know—tell him who has called upon me, and for what; and trust to forty-eight hours' start—and flight.'

Here his meditations were disturbed. Right in front of him, in the middle of the Serpentine, where the stream was deepest and yet the crowd thickest, there was a sudden report, like the discharge of a cannon, followed by the scattering of the crowd in all directions; while everywhere the treacherous ice broke beneath the flying feet, and plunged them in the cold water below. Was it possible? Where the people had been crowded, skating and running, Anthony gazed upon a great open space, in which a hundred and fifty people were struggling in the water among the broken blocks of ice for very life, amid the shrieks and cries of spectators helpless to do anything.

In a moment, the Society's men were out upon their ladders, and ready with their boats, their ropes, and their life-belts. Dripping forms of men and women were dragged from death, and hurried across to warm fires and dry towels. The crowd surged down to the edge of the water with cries and shouts, as eager to watch the fight for life as if it were a show of gladiators. Anthony felt his own pulses quicken, and the blood flow swiftly, as one after the other the victims were rescued. He was rudely torn from his own troubles, and, for the moment, forgot them. When it was all over, when it seemed as if the men in the boat with the drags had nothing more to do, he bethought him of his coat, and that it was getting cold. He left the shore and went back to the hut.

His friend, the man with the corks, was gone. Doubtless he was one of those with the ladders. A policeman was left in charge. He was talking to a girl of his acquaintance.

'It isn't them as is drowned,' he was saying, 'that the crowd cares about—they go down quick, and they don't come up no more. It's them as is saved.'

'How many should you think is drowned?' asked the girl.

The man shook his head.

'Who can tell? We shall go on fishing of them up one by one. In the summer perhaps, if they let the water down, we shall find a body or two we never suspected. And for the next month or so, if a young fellow has bolted or a girl has run away, they will make inquiries here and say he was drowned on the ice. Lord bless you! it's a regular godsend to bolters and runaways, is an accident like this.'

'Ah!' replied the girl, ruminating over this statement. 'Here's a coat, now,' she said presently, taking up Anthony Hamblin's overcoat; 'I suppose that belongs to a skater.'

'Yes, it does. Harris told me he was taking care of it for a gentleman he knew, who had gone on the ice.'

'I wonder if he's one of them as went *in* the ice,' said the girl. 'Shall I look to see if he has left a name. No; you look.'

The policeman put his hand in the pocket and drew out a pocket-book full of letters.

'Here we are, sure enough. Letters addressed to Anthony Hamblin—Anthony Hamblin—cards—Anthony Hamblin. You are all right, Mr. Anthony Hamblin, Clapham Common. If you *are* drowned, all we have got to do is to carry this coat home to your family, and it will break the news for us, a deal better than we can do it for ourselves.'

'Lor!' cried the girl, 'ain't it horrible? And do you really think that the coat belongs to a ——that poor Mr. Hamblin is actually drowned? Good gracious! Why I couldn't never touch the coat again.'

Silly,' said the guardian of the peace. 'How do I know if he's drowned or not? If he is, he will never come and ask for his coat. If he is not, why then he will be round here in a minute or two with a shilling for Harris for taking care of it. Don't you fill your head with nonsense.'

The man listening to this talk, the real owner of the coat, was trembling as if with cold. It was not the cold, however, but the eagerness of his thoughts which agitated him. The words of the policeman inspired him with a sudden idea.

He saw a way of escape.

He had been praying in a despairing mood for a way—any way. Here was one suddenly, unexpectedly, offering itself.

He said, in his mind, 'She will pursue me to ruin or to death. What if I were really dead? Then nothing would ever be investigated; nothing would ever be found out. Alison would shed a few tears, it is true, but she would dry them soon; she would marry young Yorke. A few years more and Rachel Nethersole would be dead too, and with her all memory of this thing. Her revenge would be ended, because death brings an end to all. The honour of the house would be saved. Alison would be saved from disgrace. Why, it seems no sacrifice at all, considering what there is at stake.'

He turned from the Serpentine and walked resolutely straight across the Park towards the east.

'She said, to my ruin or my death. Very well, then, I am DEAD.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE DAY AFTER.

WHEN Anthony Hamblin rashly jumped at the conclusion that by effacing himself he could remove all trouble at one stroke and enable everybody else to live happy ever after, he calculated on that one trouble alone. Now the network of human miseries is so artfully constructed that when you have got rid of the most pressing and troublesome by some clever *coup-de-main*, you find you have only opened the door to other unsuspected causes of suffering. The earth is like that island seen by Lucian, which was planted everywhere with knives, swords, daggers, pikes, lances, and spears, so that the wretched inhabitants constantly spiked, lacerated, gashed, and ripped open their unlucky skins. Nature is always ready to stick in the knife in some place where we least expect it. At any rate, to run away never helps: assume rather a bold front, and buy a pennyworth of court-plaster.

As every copybook which has room on the text-hand page says: 'Temerity dismays the Foe.'

Yet it seems so easy simply to run away. Fighting is troublesome and exciting. It requires physical activity; it prevents the solid enjoyment of meals; it interrupts the calm flow of ideas; it makes a Christian man angry, inclined to evil thought, and harsh speech, and desire of revenge. You run away, and there is no troublesome fight at all. To be sure, you may find that your self-respect has been left on the field of battle. In Mr. Hamblin's case that would not matter, because there was not going to be an Anthony Hamblin any more. There are, too, so many situations in life when flight would seem desirable: when you have become so clogged and bemired with debts that there is no help but in a complete change of identity: when you have *done something*, and it is going to be found out; when you have got into a mess of a domestic kind, and are threatened with a breach-of-promise case: when you are let out of prison: when your conscience—this case is very, very rare—smites you for having given your relations so much trouble, and you resolve that they shall have heard the last of you, lent their last five-pound note to you, written the last letter of remonstrance, appeal, and indignation, and forgiven you for the last, the four hundred and ninetieth time: when you find that you have been on a wrong tack—another rare case—and have advocated mischievous and mistaken doctrines: when you find that your marriage has proved a failure and that the poor woman tied to you would be certainly happier as a widow, and perhaps happier with another man: when you consider how detestable a father, husband, brother, son, cousin, and distant relation you have been, and how very satisfactory it would be to the whole family to put on mourning for you. 'He is gone, poor fellow; but one cannot feel otherwise than relieved. When a man is irreclaimable, he is better—under the sod.' You would hear this said, being in reality alive, although hidden away.

It is possible to multiply such cases indefinitely. There are indeed many men, of my own personal acquaintance, who may perhaps take a hint, should they read these pages, and consider how much better it would be for everybody if they were only as good as dead. I believe, indeed, that there must be whole townships, with gay billiard-saloons, churches, and daily papers, somewhere in the States, in which all the inhabitants are men who have disappeared. There is somewhere a subterranean population, so to speak, of buried folk; they are ghosts in the flesh; they are cousins, brothers, uncles, nephews, long since mourned as dead, now gambling and drinking under new names. Some day I will visit such a place and get their secrets out of

the men over Bourbon whisky, under promise of inviolable secrecy. In England there are no such townships of refuge; but Alsatia exists, and has always existed. It used to be somewhere about Blackfriars—it is now, I believe, somewhere east of Thames Tunnel. The unburied dead—those who have generously disappeared—when they do not go to America, take refuge in the vast, unexplored, monotonous East-end. Here all alike live and die in a grey and sunless obscurity; here a man may pass a hundred years forgotten and unsuspected.

Mr. Hamblin never returned to claim his great-coat. The policeman waited: as long as she could, the girl waited too, attracted by the singular fascination of a coat that in all probability had belonged to a drowned man. Presently, the Humane Society's officer, Harris, came back, his work of dragging and rescuing over for the present; then the girl went away, and the two men waited. The scared and terrified skaters had all left the ice.

The afternoon came on; policemen and officers were still at their posts; the banks were crowded with those who came to gaze on the gap in the ice, the sudden grave of so many; the early evening closed in, but Mr. Hamblin appeared not.

When Harris carried back his tent to the office of the Society, and his day's work was done, he, with the policeman, made their way to Clapham Common, and delivered up the coat and told their story.

It was then nearly six o'clock. Reporters had already got hold of lists, so far as they could be arrived at. One or two had learned from Harris that the owner of the coat, by which he kept so steady a watch, was a great City magnate, chief partner in the well-known firm of 'Anthony Hamblin and Company;' and in the later editions of the evening papers it was rumoured that Mr. Anthony Hamblin was among the missing. Yet no word of this report went down to the house in Clapham Common, where Alison, wondering a little why her father had not kept his appointment on the Mount Pond, sat in quiet happiness, expecting no evil, and dreaming of Gilbert Yorke.

When the two men came to the house in the evening, they were like unto Joseph's brethren when they brought with them their false *pièce de conviction*, inasmuch as they bore a coat, saying, 'This have we found; know now whether it be thy father's coat or no.'

Surely, surely, had her father thought of Alison's grief and terror, he would have spared her the cruel blow. Had he thought of her long watches in the night, of her agony, her hoping against hope, he might have found some better way.

And yet, he might have said, 'Suffering is better than shame.

What are the tears of a night, of a week, of a season, compared to the wound which never heals, the scar which cannot be hidden, the mantle of disgrace which must be worn like the canvas suit of a lifelong convict—till death brings an end?'

When the coat came, they sent messengers and inquiries everywhere. Mr. Hamblin had not been to the City; his partners had not seen him at all that day; he had kept none of his appointments.

On Sunday morning, when messages came from all quarters to ask whether Mr. Hamblin had returned, there were no news of him; but Miss Hamblin was like a wild thing, they reported, for grief and anxiety, and Mrs. Cridland could do nothing to ease or soothe her.

The latest editions of the evening papers added to the first brief account of the accident lists of the drowned, as accurately as could be obtained. Among them was the name of Mr. Anthony Hamblin.

'It is generally feared,' said the *Globe*, 'that among those who have met a sudden end in this dreadful disaster is Mr. Anthony Hamblin, senior partner in the house of Anthony Hamblin and Co., of Great St. Simon Apostle, City. The unfortunate gentleman was last seen and spoken to by an officer of the Royal Humane Society—Harris by name—to whom he was well known as a liberal supporter of the Institution. Mr. Hamblin expressed his intention of going on the ice for an hour, and entrusted to the man's care a heavy overcoat. He had skates with him. This was about half-an-hour before the breaking of the ice. He did not return for his coat. As yet, the body has not been identified among those recovered. We learn by telegram that he had not up to six o'clock returned to his residence on Clapham Common. Mr. Hamblin, who was greatly respected in private life, was a widower, and leaves one daughter.'

Stephen Hamblin had been in his chambers all the afternoon, waiting for his brother, who did not keep the appointment. He was anxious to see Anthony for one or two special reasons of his own, connected with that shortness of cash we have already alluded to. It was not usual with Anthony to miss an engagement, nor was it, on the other hand, a common thing with him to seek one with Stephen. What was it he wanted to talk about? There could surely be no unpleasantness about past and future advances; that was altogether unlike Anthony. Some slight anxiety, however, weighed on the mind of the younger brother. He had a foreshadowing of something disagreeable. So that it was almost with a sense of relief that at half-past five he gave up the hope of seeing Anthony, and resolved to wait for him no longer.

Stephen went to the reading-room of his club. There was no one in the place whom he knew. All along the streets he had heard the boys shouting as they brandished their papers: 'Dreadful accident on the Serpentine! List of the drowned!'

Things like domestic calamities, national misfortunes, or the affairs of other nations, troubled Stephen very little. He had not the curiosity to buy an evening paper: at the club he had not the curiosity to look at one. He sat by the fire with a French novel in his hand, one of a school which is now unhappily coming to the front. The author was determined on being more than realistic: he would spare the reader nothing; he invented details. When Stephen had read and fully realised all the dreadfulness of a low and small workshop crammed with work-girls; when he had read their talk; when he saw them before him in all their squalor; when he was beginning to think that the other sex had better never have been invented, the clock struck seven, and he remembered that his luncheon had been scanty and early. He threw away the novel, which he never afterwards finished, took an evening paper, and descended to the dining-room. There is one thing about a good dinner which I do not remember to have seen noticed anywhere —it demands a fitting successor; you cannot, without doing a violence to the best and most gastric impulses of our humanity, follow up a great and glorious dinner by a common steak. Stephen, though he did not put his thought into words, felt this. He ordered a little purée, a red mullet, a cutlet, and a golden plover. He said he would take a bottle of champagne, Heidsieck—a bottle, not a pint. And then, while the soup was being brought, he sat down and began the evening's news.

He threw down the paper with an oath. 'Always my cursed luck,' he said. 'Just when I wanted him worse than ever.'

Some men have been known to shed tears at hearing of a brother's sudden death; some have instinctively considered how the calamity would affect his widow and children. Stephen and a certain American boy (he, on learning that his father was drowned, lamented that his own pocket-knife was gone with him) are the only two of whom I have ever heard that they immediately thought of their personal and selfish interests. Some feeling of regret might have been looked for, some expression of sorrow for a brother who had done so much for him. But there was none. He scowled at the paper: he brooded over the news. It spoiled his dinner; it took the sparkle out of the champagne, the flavour out of the plover. When he had finished, he walked quickly to his chambers in Pall Mall, packed up some things, and drove to Clapham Common. The partners were there; Gilbert Yorke was there; they were looking in each other's faces, dismayed. Mrs. Cridland was somewhere

weeping with Alison; the boy was standing by the fire in the study, ready to run wherever he might be sent, awed and tearful.

'Stephen,' said Augustus, taking him by the hand, 'I am glad you are come. This is your proper place in the present dreadful anxiety.'

'Yes,' he said loudly and defiantly. 'Tell Miss Hamblin, Charles'—this to the footman—'or better, Mrs. Cridland, that I have arrived. Yes, Augustus, this is my place, with my niece. I shall remain here for her protection.'

No one went to bed in the Hamblin household. Alison walked up and down all night, starting at the merest sound, rushing to the door if she thought she heard the sound of wheels. With her watched Mrs. Cridland and the boy. Stephen sat in the study. He had no thought of sleep; his mind was strangely agitated; from time to time he took a glass of brandy and water; and as the night went on, when the hands of the clock pointed to those small hours when, if a man be awake, his conscience tells him all the real truth about the past, and his terrors preach most of the possible truth about the future, his despondency became so extreme that he could not bear to sit still.

When, at length, the long winter's night was over, and the slow dawn appeared, Stephen began to take a little comfort.

'He *must*,' he said, 'have left me something. He would not give everything to that girl. He *could* not leave me absolutely dependent on her whims.'

In the kitchen sat the servants, watching in silence. If one of the younger maids dropped off, she was awakened by the others and accused, in whispers, of betraying a hard and unfeeling nature.

At eight, Harris came and saw Stephen.

'There's eight-and-twenty bodies,' he said, 'waiting identification, but not one like Mr. Hamblin.'

'What do you think?' asked Stephen.

'What is a man to think?' replied the man. 'It was a cold day. If Mr. Hamblin did not go down with the rest, why didn't he come back for the coat? The body will be recovered, likely, to-day.'

But it was not.

The news was heard by Mr. Alderney Codd at eight o'clock, as he was sitting among a circle of friends at a certain tavern near Fleet Street. They were as yet only beginning their whisky and water, and the night was young. Generally the conversation on Saturday nights turned on various projects of ambitious financing, histories of *coups* which had been made

and of others, much grander, which had been missed. It is always so: the things in which we fail are ever so much greater than the things in which we succeed. Yet it gives a feeling of superiority to have missed an event greater than any that has fallen in the way of your friends.

When Alderney Codd had partly recovered the first shock of the sad news, he became at once the hero of the evening. He proceeded to relate, with many digressions and dramatic touches which seemed to brighten the situation, how, only the very night before, he had borrowed of his cousin, Anthony Hamblin, that very coat, fur-lined, wondrous, which now, an object of veneration, hung upon the wall before them for all eyes to see. He said that he was tempted to retain that coat in memory of the lender, and as a special mark of his cousin's affection and esteem for him. He gave free scope to his imagination in discoursing on the greatness of the Hamblin family, and on his own connection with the cousinhood. And he naturally assumed additional importance as a possible, nay, a probable, legatee. It was later—in fact, next morning, when the glow of the whisky and water had departed—that honest Alderney reflected with sadness on his own personal loss, not only of a kind friend, but of a ready lender. And it was with a heart unfeignedly sad that he walked over to Clapham, and watched awhile with Stephen.

There was another man, more deeply interested in the event than either, who read the news with a strange feeling of coldness, as if he were indeed dead. This was Anthony himself. He had taken a cheap lodging over a small coffee-house in the Commercial Road, and saw the news in the Sunday morning paper, while eating the richly-flavoured egg and dubious butter which they brought him for breakfast. He had already so changed himself in appearance, by cutting off his beard and presenting smoothness of chin and cheek to the eyes of mankind, that it would have been difficult for his nearest friends to recognise him. It is a moot question among gentlemen of the burgling and other professions which require ready disguise, whether the bearded man who shaves, or the smooth man who puts on a false beard, has the better chance. I think the feeling is in favour of the former. As regards Anthony Hamblin, he added, for greater security, a pair of green spectacles. Instead of his usual hat he had a billycock, and instead of a frock-coat he wore a nondescript garment of the pea-jacket kind, only longer, such as might have been sported by a racing-man or a publican of broad views. There was not in all Scotland Yard a single officer able to recognise him without close scrutiny.

He read the paragraph in the paper with great care and attention. Then he laid it down, and began to consider.

After breakfast, he went to the bedroom which was his for the day, and considered again. Yet there was nothing to consider about, so far as Alison was concerned, because the *coup* was struck. 'What was done,' he said to himself, 'could not be undone.' Yet, with regard to himself, there was ample ground for meditation. He had not provided for the step. He had little money with him, only the three or four pounds which a man may generally carry in his pocket; he had drawn no cheque, and it was now too late. In addition to his little purse, he possessed, he reflected, his diamond studs, his one ring, his gold shirt-links, and his watch and chain. The watch alone had cost him four-and-twenty guineas. But after the proceeds of all these gauds were spent, what was he to do next?

Anything, except one thing. He would never return home.

Another person heard the news, but not until Monday, because that person, who was Rachel Nethersole, never dreamed of the iniquity of looking at a Sunday paper.

She was deeply disappointed—not so much shocked as disappointed.

'I told him,' she said to the faithful servant who followed her to the modern Babylon, 'that I was compelled—being an Instrument—to follow him to his death or to his ruin. I little thought—but the Judgments are swift—that his death was so near. I imagined'—she sighed plaintively, as if she meant that she hoped—'that it was his ruin which was imminent. We are purblind mortals; and yet he warned me, being so near his end, when men are sometimes granted a vision of the future, that if I continued to pursue the case I should entail consequences the nature of which I little dreamed. Such consequences came as *he* little dreamed. What a pity!'

She sniffed violently and with temper. However, at the hour appointed, she repaired to her lawyer.

'I should like,' she said, to his intense astonishment—'I should like the warrant for the apprehension of Anthony Hamblin to be taken out all the same.'

'Good heavens!' he cried, 'you cannot ask for the arrest of a dead man!'

'I wish to show the world the real nature of his character.'

This was revenge indeed. But Miss Nethersole had to yield to her legal adviser's representations. He said that he refused to make himself and her ridiculous.

'What you feel, no doubt,' he said blandly, 'to be a conscientious measure dictated by pure justice, other people would call revenge.'

'I am the Instrument——' she began in her stern cold manner.

'Madam,' the lawyer interrupted, 'no doubt—no doubt; but death has removed your victim. Heaven has interfered. Your

instrumentality is no longer required. As for this claim, it becomes a money-matter. Leave it as such with me; and I will present it, at proper time and place, to the deceased gentleman's executors.'

'So that they will know him—as he was—in his real light!'

'Undoubtedly; they will know all that I tell them—all that I have learned from you. If your claim be disputed, we can then seek a remedy in an action at law.'

'So that then all the world would know?'

'All the world,' he echoed. 'In that case, which is not at all likely to happen, all the world would know.'

Rachel Nethersole went away. She retired to her house at Newbury, where she resumed the Exercises peculiar to her sect, and tried to feel satisfied with the result of her instrumentality.

But she was not. She was profoundly dissatisfied; she had looked for nothing less than going to the police-courts and crying: 'Your dead man, whose virtues you extol, was a common cheat and forger. Here are the proofs. Had it not been for his death, I should have had him arrested on this criminal charge.' And now she was told that she could do nothing—nothing at all; and the world would go on ascribing virtues to this citizen cut off so suddenly. Her home, which for three months had been glorified, so to speak, by the lurid light of coming revenge, was dull and quiet now that light had gone out of it: her daily life had lost its excitement, and was monotonous. The old pleasures pleased no more.

She had been so certain of revenge; she had with her own eyes gloated over her enemy as she announced to him the things which were to befall him: and now—and now, to think that he had escaped her clutches by an accident which had never entered into her calculations. Why, if John of Leyden had hanged himself, or John Huss died suddenly in the night before the day appointed for torture, the same kind of disappointment would have been felt by the judges. Nor was there so much consolation as might be at first supposed, in the thought that her prey had been cut off in all his sins. Some, no doubt. She would have preferred to think that he was alive still and in prison, clad in convict garb, fed on convict fare, doing convict work. A hard, revengeful woman.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE PARTNERS MADE A PROPOSAL.

They began by advertising. That was the only thing to do. They advertised everywhere in newspapers; outside police-stations—side by side with the proclamations of a hundred pounds reward for the discovery of murderers; on hoardings, wherever the eye of a passer-by might be caught. For there was one slender chance. Alison told how her uncle had left her in the morning *distrait*, troubled about something. What could he be troubled about? Everything had gone well with him; his business interests were flourishing; his investments were sound; he had no annoyances, unless it was that caused by his visitor: he was at peace with the only member of the family who had ever troubled him.

The partners whispered a word to each other; their wives and daughters whispered it to Alison. Sudden madness. Such a thing was unknown in the Hamblin family, but not unknown in the history of humanity. Such a thing was possible. It was almost the only explanation possible, except that of death. Anthony Hamblin might have been robbed and murdered. That crime, also, is unhappily not unknown, but rare in London: he could not have been robbed and shut up. Therefore he was either dead or insane.

In a story told by one of our best English novelists, a man, formerly the skipper of a ship, loses his reason, but retains his sailor instinct, and ships himself before the mast as an able seaman. This story came back to Alison's mind, and she dwelt upon it.

'He left me,' she said to Gilbert Yorke, 'my poor dear left me trying to look cheerful: but he was not. He was troubled in his mind. Painful recollections of things long since forgotten had been revived in his mind. He could not sleep that night after our party; he could not take his breakfast; he was uncertain in his manner, and went backward and forward. Gilbert, I am sure that he is not dead, but living—somewhere, with his poor brain full of some dreadful hallucination.'

'It may be, Alison,' said Gilbert, willing to encourage her. It may be so, but then you must consider how we have advertised him, how minutely we have described him, and how the papers have talked about it. Why, I should say that half the people in this country know that Mr. Anthony Hamblin is miss-

ing, and what he is like. The partners began by offering a reward of one hundred pounds; now they have made it a thousand. Why, what a chance for a man who thinks he recognises the missing man in a stranger!'

'Then,' said Alison, 'he must be somewhere among the other half, the people who have never heard of him. Gilbert, do not discourage me,' she went on, her deep eyes filling with tears. 'To think that he is not dead, but living; to dream at night that his step may be upon the road near the house; that he is coming back to us all again—it fills me with comfort and hope: but to think otherwise would—oh! I *must* think that he is living. When they brought home the coat of Joseph to his father, Jacob rent his clothes and mourned. Yet Joseph was not dead, and presently he was restored to his father and his brethren. Oh, Gilbert, some day my father will wake up from his madness, and come back to us all in his right mind.'

This speculation found no favour with Stephen. His brother was dead. That was a fact which admitted of no doubt.

Certainly, the silence which followed the advertisements boded little hope for Alison's theory. There was hardly any attempt at response. Here and there a letter came, mostly ill-spelt and ill-written, stating that the writer knew such a man as was described, namely, with long brown beard, of whom he knew nothing else. There was that single fact of a beard—could he be the missing Anthony Hamblin? And, if so, the advertisers would bear in mind the claim of the writer to the reward. But this sort of clue led to nothing. Either, then, Anthony Hamblin was dead, or he was living, as Alison suggested, among that half of the English people who had not even heard of his disappearance. Again, a gentleman, who dated from a public-house in the High Street of Islington, wrote once offering confidently to produce Mr. Anthony Hamblin, if the advertisers would first advance ten pounds for preliminary expenses, leaving the rest of the reward open until the restoration of the missing gentleman. And another worthy wrote, calling himself the representative and guardian of a boy, whose father was Anthony Hamblin. This philanthropist, on being interviewed by a clerk from the solicitor's office, first offered to square the claim for fifty pounds down, and then, being threatened with conspiracy, abruptly bolted.

At last, Alison consented to put on the garb of mourning. But it was in deference to the wishes of her cousins. For herself, she would have preferred to continue in the belief that the missing man was not dead but living, and would return some day and ere long to his daughter's arms.

Stephen, naturally, remained in the house. That course suited him perfectly, first, because he was short of ready-money,

and free quarters meant great economy; secondly, because the free quarters were excellent, meaning wine of the very noblest *crus*, cigars of the finest brands, and a really splendid cook; thirdly, because it gave him an opportunity of producing a favourable impression on Alison, which might eventually be useful; and lastly, for a purpose of his own, which was conceived later on, by whisper of the devil, and which rapidly grew upon him and became an over-mastering passion.

He was not a lady's man. He was not altogether at his ease with his cousin Flora Cridland and his niece Alison. He rejoiced, therefore, when he found that they preferred an early dinner with the boy, and allowed him to dine alone in the study. The breakfast hour, again, was early. He would breakfast in the study. After breakfast he inquired ceremoniously after the health of his niece, whom he seldom saw. He interfered with none of the arrangements of the house; went to town every day after breakfast, came back most days to dine by himself, and, after dinner, either read a French novel or put up his feet, smoked cigars, drank brandy-and-soda, and reflected. The quarters were so good that he had not the least intention of turning out.

If he met Alison in the house, he was gravely deferential, sympathetic, but not obtrusive; if he met his cousin, Flora Cridland, he was more sprightly, but kind and thoughtful; if he met the boy, he would pat his cheek gently, and ask, with a sigh of real feeling, how he was getting on with his Latin verses. He gave no trouble, assumed no air of command, and gained every kind of credit, solely because he did nothing. And, really, when one considers how reputations are made, whether by statesmen, governors of provinces, able editors, or original dramatists, one is inclined to think that the art of doing nothing has hitherto been most successfully practised and most grossly underrated. Had you, dear reader, never done anything except follow in a groove, you would doubtless have been, ere now, F.R.S., C.B., C.M.G., K.C.B., K.C.M.G., and perhaps Baronet. Whereas, in consequence of your perpetual activity, you are now no better than myself, plain Mister, *le Sieur*, Esquire by courtesy, with never a title to your back.

Stephen's courteous and considerate demeanour was due mainly to a grievous doubt which constantly afflicted and possessed him. Panurge was not a greater martyr to a doubt than Stephen Hamblin.

Consider his position. He had been for nearly twenty years dependent on his brother. Anthony never offered to make him any allowance. He seemed perfectly to realise that Stephen's pretence at business, financing or broking, was only the shallowest form; and there was the understanding between

them that when Stephen wanted any money he was to write for it, or call for it, and have it.

Only one man, Mr. Billiter, the family solicitor, knew of those loans, though the partners suspected them.

Anthony being dead, who was going to have the honour of maintaining Stephen?

There was absolutely no form of labour by which he could earn his daily bread; there was none by which he meant to try. He called himself an indigo broker, but he had done that for twenty years and more. He sometimes dabbled in small financing schemes with his cousin Alderney Codd, but that would not do for a permanent prop. And his private account in the bank was next to nothing.

The great doubt, therefore, was how Anthony had disposed of his property by testament. And really, considering everything, Stephen seems justified in being anxious.

He might have satisfied himself upon the point by the simple means of calling at the solicitor's office. There were reasons, however, why he hesitated. In the first place, there were associations of an extremely disagreeable character connected with the one room in that firm's offices into which he was always shown. It was the room of the senior partner, Mr. Billiter. Stephen, although now in his forty-fifth year, was afraid of that old man. It had been Mr. Billiter's duty to confer with him in connection with a good many episodes of his career which he was desirous of forgetting. Now Mr. Billiter, a man with old-fashioned notions about repentance, had an unpleasant way of recalling these little matters. Again, Mr. Billiter was the only man who knew the secret which Stephen and Anthony kept between themselves—the fact of Stephen's absolute dependence on the elder brother.

At first he thought that he might be dispossessed from his self-constituted post of guardian, in favour of one of the cousins, presumably Augustus or William Hamblin, appointed by the will. But time passed on, and no such intimation was sent to him. Had, then, Anthony actually appointed him the guardian of his daughter? It seemed incredible, considering the history of the past. And yet he was Anthony's only brother.

And even if he were appointed guardian, there was the anxiety about the future. What provision, if any, had his brother made for him? Surely some; otherwise he would have literally to beg his daily bread of his niece. The facts might be presented, he thought, in graceful, pathetic, and attractive form. But influences might be brought to bear on the girl, against which he would be powerless. There were his cousins, the partners; they were not friendly. There was that young fellow Yorke, always about the place, no doubt anxious to hang

up his hat in the house, and marry the heiress. Of course Alison's husband would not desire to diminish his wife's income by a permanent charge. Yet how could he live under eight hundred a year, or so? Why, his dinners cost him three hundred a year, at least. Anthony had never counted what he bestowed; or, if he did practise that meanness, had the grace to hide it. How should he persuade Alison that nothing under a thousand a year would adequately represent his brother's affection? And what if the will contained a provision ridiculously small?

He wrestled with these doubts for six weeks and more. During that time the advertising went on; and they all kept up some show of pretence that perhaps Anthony would return unexpectedly, recovered from that hallucination in which Alison believed so firmly.

One day, however, Stephen received a letter from Mr. Billiter, the family solicitor, officially and stiffly worded, requesting the honour of an interview at a stated time.

Mr. Billiter, who perhaps knew more family secrets than any other man of his profession in London, was not, as we have said, popular among the prodigal sons with whose career he was acquainted. He had a great, a profound dislike for scattering, wasting, idleness, and debauchery of all kinds, being himself a man of great common sense, holding a just view of the proportion of things, and incapable, at all times in his life, of being allured by the imaginary pleasures of riot. Having this dislike to the doings of Comus, he showed it in a certain contemptuous treatment of those prodigals who came to him to know the intentions of the family; and whether he gave them a cheque, or told them they were to be pitchforked into some unfortunate colony with a ten-pound note, or announced another act of forgiveness, he put the facts so plainly that the youth, whether repentant or not, went away with a sense of humiliation and shame very disagreeable to a high-toned, whole-souled prodigal.

He held Stephen Hamblin in especial dislike, as a prodigal of five-and-twenty years' standing, which was really extending the rope beyond all precedent. Stephen was irreclaimable. It was hard to look on, and see the waste of so much money on so bad a subject.

He was in appearance a shrivelled-up man, between sixty and seventy years of age; a thin, small man, with grey hair, still strong, and thick, pointed chin, keen bright eyes, and a sharp nose.

He received Stephen without offering to shake hands with him, coolly nodding, and going on with the papers before him. Stephen took a chair by the fire, and waited. Presently the

old man jerked his head sideways, and said, without taking the trouble to look at his visitor :

'This is a bad business for you, Stephen. What do you propose to do ?'

There was a twinkle in his eye, caught by Stephen, which seemed to mean that the worse the business turned out, the better he would be pleased.

Then he pushed away his papers, leaned back in his wooden chair, with his elbows on the arms, and looked round.

'That depends upon my brother's testamentary dispositions,' said Stephen, reading the twinkle in that sense, and tentatively.

'I am coming to that presently. Meantime, you see, you are left without any resources at all. And to work you are ashamed.'

Stephen laughed. He was resolved on keeping his temper if possible.

'Can I dig ?' he asked, 'or shall I beg ?'

'When I recall,' continued this disagreeable old man, 'the various occasions on which you and I have conversed in this office——'

'Thank you.' Stephen made an impatient gesture. 'I have not the least wish to be reminded of them again. Great heavens ! is it impossible for you to forget those old schoolboy scrapes ?'

'Quite,' replied Mr. Billiter, 'unless the schoolboy repents and reforms. Of repentance I have as yet seen no trace. I fear you have never experienced that salutary discipline.'

'If I had, you would not have heard of it,' said Stephen, his face growing dark.

'Nay, nay ; I should have had ocular demonstration. We know the tree by its fruits.'

This was an unpromising beginning. The lawyer, doubtless for some reason of his own, went on to recall in detail, one after the other, the whole of his previous interviews with his visitor. When he had quite finished, Stephen's face wore an expression of wrath suppressed with difficulty, which would have delighted his enemies.

'I believe,' he said at last, 'that I have now reminded you of everything that has previously passed between us. If I have omitted any important point, it is from no desire to spare your feelings.'

'That I can believe,' said Stephen, with a ghastly grin.

'But from forgetfulness. I am growing old, and some of the details may have escaped my memory.'

'So much the better,' said Stephen.

'All this, however,' the old man went on, 'is a preamble

I am now coming to the real business of the day. I asked you to call upon me because——'

'I thought,' said Stephen, 'you were going to confine yourself to the pleasure of reviving the business of the past. That is a part of our interview which has always afforded you so much gratification.'

'Not at all, Stephen, not at all. I merely sketched out some of the past because it is as well that men should know sometimes the light in which others regard their actions. Fortunately for you, I am the only man in possession of all the facts. Yet the partners in the house know some of them.'

'Would you mind proceeding straight to the point?' Stephen cried, impatiently.

'I am doing so.'

Here Mr. Billiter pushed back his chair and rose. A standing position gives one a certain advantage—stature has nothing to do with it.

'Do you think, Stephen Hamblin,' he asked, shaking a judicial forefinger, 'that a man of your antecedents is a fit person to be the guardian of a young lady?'

'Do you mean that I shall rob her, or ill-treat her, or beat her with a stick, or murder her, then?'

'That is not an answer to my question, which is, are you a proper person for such a charge?'

'I really think that I am not called upon to answer that question.'

'You will see directly why I put it. I only want you to acknowledge the justice of the proposal I am about to make to you.'

'Oh! you are going to make a proposal? Well, I am ready to listen.'

'I must remind you that you have no money and no income, that you were dependent on your brother until his death, that you have drawn upon him of late years for a very large amount—many hundreds every year, and that, unless you get something out of the estate, you will be reduced to the painful necessity of working or starving. Your cousins in the firm, as I dare say you know very well, will certainly do nothing for you.'

'You have put the case plainly. It is a perfectly correct statement, and the situation has been before my eyes for six weeks. Now for your proposal.'

'Of course my statement of the facts is perfectly correct. Remember, then, your position.'

'I want to know, however, what my brother's will directed.'

'My dear sir, the surviving partners feel so strongly in the matter, that, had his will named you as guardian and trustee,

they would have opposed your appointment in open court as an unfit person for the trust; and then those facts would have come out which are better hidden.'

'I am much obliged to my cousins,' said Stephen. 'They are, and always have been, my very dear friends. I am *very* much obliged to them.'

'You ought to be, when you learn what they propose.'

'But my brother's will—what does that say? Why is it not produced?'

'Because, my dear sir' (the lawyer spoke very slowly and distinctly), 'your brother Anthony, in spite of his great wealth, could never be persuaded to make a will at all. He always put it off. There is no will.'

'No will!' Stephen stared in amazement; 'my brother made no will?'

'None. There is, of course, the slender chance that some other firm of lawyers have drawn it up for him. We have searched his private safe at the office; we have searched his private papers at Clapham——'

'After I went there?'

'The day after, while you were away. All business documents and securities were removed by myself, and brought here. The papers left in his desk and drawers are nothing but old accounts, diaries, and letters. There is no will.'

'No will?' Stephen repeated. It was not till afterwards that he waxed indignant over the want of confidence which caused the partners to remove the papers.

'No will; consequently no bequests for anyone. Do you understand your position? Miss Hamblin is sole heiress to the whole property.'

Stephen remained silent. This was, indeed, the very worst thing that could possibly have happened to him.

'You now understand the general situation,' continued the lawyer, sitting down again, and are prepared no doubt to meet my proposal in a favourable spirit?'

'What is your proposal?'

'It is one which was suggested by Mr. Augustus Hamblin in the first place, and put into shape by me. It is this. Miss Hamblin wants about fifteen months before she comes of age. That is a very short period of guardianship. We are willing, so as to avoid all suspicion of scandal, that you should be nominally the guardian, and that letters of administration, if they are granted at all during the minority, shall be taken out in your name. We, however, shall relieve you of all your duties. You will have nothing whatever to do with the management of the estates. You will continue to live at Clapham, if you please, or until your residence becomes distasteful to Alison;

and for your trouble, whatever trouble the arrangement may cause you, we are prepared to offer you the sum of five hundred pounds. If Miss Hamblin consents, as her cousins will advise her to do, that sum will be continued afterwards for your lifetime as an annual charge upon the estate, subject to good behaviour.'

'What is good behaviour?' Stephen asked, looking as amiable as a hyena.

'If you raise money upon it or sell it, as if it were an actual annuity of your own, or disgrace yourself in any way, the allowance will be stopped.'

'Have you anything more to say?' added Stephen, rising.

'Nothing more,' said the lawyer, pleasantly. 'Let me see; we have recapitulated the facts, have we not?'

'Oh yes; you have raked up all the mud.'

'And I've given you to understand my opinion about your conduct?'

'Yes; you've certainly told me that.'

'And—and—yes, I really think that is all.'

'In that case I can go, I suppose.' Stephen put on his hat. 'Is it not a very remarkable thing, Mr. Billiter, that at every interview I have ever had with you, I should desire vehemently to kill you?'

'It really is remarkable, Stephen Hamblin,' answered the lawyer, with a hard smile; 'it shows how admirable are our laws that you are deterred from carrying your wish into effect. By the way, you accept the conditions, I suppose?'

'Yes, I accept; of course I accept. If you had offered me a hundred a year, I must have accepted. I suppose the outside world will not know. Alison will not know, for the present.'

'I see no reason why anyone should know. Augustus Hamblin does not talk. And, Stephen,'—just as the door was closing—'what a very sad pity it is that you never *could* run straight! When are you going to begin repentance? Time is getting on, and the rope will be quite played out some day.'

Stephen slammed the door, and strode away with rage tearing at his heart.

He walked all the way, because he was in such a rage, to Clapham Common. By the time he got there, he had walked himself into a good temper. Why, what did it matter what the old man said? Five hundred a year, not so much as he had always managed to get out of Anthony, but still something; still a good round sum for a bachelor, and for a year at least the run of the fraternal cellar. Not at all bad.

He sent word to Alison that he would like to see her if she was quite disengaged.

'My dear,' he said, taking her by the two hands—he had never

called her before by any other term of endearment—'my dear, I have to-day been with your poor father's lawyer. They have invited me, with the concurrence of your cousins, and for the brief space which remains before you attain your majority, to act as your guardian. I hope you will not object to me.'

He still held her two hands, gazed sentimentally into her eyes, and went on before she had time to reply:

'We have not seen so much of each other as we might have done in the old days. That was entirely my fault. My partial estrangement from you, and from the rest of the family, was my fault altogether. But your father and I were never estranged. One heart always. Perhaps I took offence because certain youthful peccadilloes were too severely visited. Perhaps I showed offence too readily, and have been forgiven with difficulty. But never mind. Those things are now like old songs. You have no fear of any more wild oats, Alison?'

'Not at all, uncle.'

She smiled in his face, as he held her hands. She was too young to see that the light in his eyes was unreal and the smile on his lips forced.

'Then that is settled. You will do what you like, go where you like, have all you wish to have. That will be my sole care as your guardian. That is my idea of looking after you for the next fifteen months or so. When you come of age, you can turn me into the street, and sit down to enjoy, all the rest of your life, this wealth of your father. Happy girl! I wish I was only twenty. And I wish I was going to have, like you, a quarter of a million of money!'

This part of his speech, at any rate, was sincere.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW STEPHEN DREAMED A DREAM.

THIS good understanding was celebrated after the English fashion. Stephen dined with the ladies in the evening. Nicolas was permitted to assist at this little banquet, which was, the boy observed with pleasure, the first cheerful meal since the calamity, and he hoped it was the presage of better things. It was, in reality, only the lifting of the clouds for a brief moment.

Stephen had never shown himself more kindly, more thoughtful, more sympathetic, than on this occasion. Alison wondered how they had all come to overlook these fine qualities of geniality and tenderness. They accounted fully, she concluded,

for her father's steady affection for him. By what sad accident was it that the cousins regarded the Black Hamblin, and had taught her to regard him, with so much dislike and suspicion? What was it in him, what had he done, that her father should so often have been rendered moody for days together? Why, this spendthrift, this prodigal, this man who was the Awful Example quoted by Aunt Flora to young Nicolas in a solemn warning, was a delightful companion, full of anecdote, of ready sympathy, quick to feel, of kind heart, and wide experience. Occasionally something was said which jarred. That, however, was due no doubt to his inexperience of the calm, domestic life.

Thinking thus, while Stephen talked, Alison caught the eyes of young Nick, who blushed immediately with an unwonted confusion. They were both thinking the same things.

Mrs. Cridland was not so ready to accept the new aspect of things without suspicion. She naturally reserved her opinions until they were in the drawing-room.

'Stephen,' she said, when arrived there, 'reminds me of what he used to be five-and-twenty years ago, when he wanted to get anything out of his mother. Poor soul! he would cajole and caress her, until she gave it him, and then he was away at once and back to his profligate courses in town. A heartless and wicked boy!'

'My dear auntie,' Alison expostulated, 'surely we ought to forget old stories if we can. I suppose my uncle is no longer what you say he was.'

'I don't know, my dear,' said her aunt, sharply. 'We never inquired into Stephen's private life after his mother died. He may be repentant, but I doubt it.'

'Perhaps,' said Alison, 'every one was hard upon him for the follies of his youth.'

'I do not know whether they were unduly hard upon him. He caused them terrible anxiety. However, that is all over. Let us, as you say, forget it. What a strange thing it is, child, that you are so like him! Sometimes, when I see you side by side, it seems as if you are more like Stephen than your poor father. You have the Hamblin face, of course—we all have that'—it was a theory among the cousins, who perhaps no more resembled each other than any other set of cousins, that there was a peculiar Hamblin face, common to all—'but you are wonderfully like your grandmother, the Señora, just as Stephen is.

At this moment the door flew open, and young Nick appeared, his hands in his pockets, his cheeks flushed, tears standing in his eyes.

'What is the matter, my boy?' cried his mother. 'I thought you were with your Uncle Stephen.'

'He is not my uncle; I will never call him by that name again!' cried the boy, bursting into tears. 'He is only a first cousin once removed.'

'Why——'

'First cousin, once removed,' he repeated; 'let him be proud of that, if he likes. Never mind, mother. I'll be even with him.' The prospect of retributive justice pleased the boy so much that he instantly mopped up his tears, and though he sat in a corner with an assumption of resentment, he had really resumed his cheerfulness.

In fact, Stephen, after the ladies left him, did not observe that Nicolas remained behind, and was seated beside the fire with a plate of preserved ginger before him. Stephen, with his shoulder turned towards the boy, and thinking himself alone, began to meditate. His meditations led him, presumably, into irritating grooves, for presently he brought his fist down upon the table with a loud and emphatic 'D——n!'

Young Nick had just finished his preserved ginger, and was considering what topic would be best to begin upon with this genial successor of Uncle Anthony, when the ejaculation startled him.

'Birds in their little nests agree,' said the boy, softly, 'to do without the wicked D.'

Stephen turned round sharply.

'What the Devil,' he cried, springing to his feet, 'do you mean by watching me? Go away! go to your mother! get out, I say!'

The injunction, being enforced by a box on the ear, left no room for doubt; and Nicolas, outraged, insulted, and humiliated, retreated, as we have seen, to a place where he could evolve a stroke of revenge. But his confidence in Stephen Hamblin was rudely destroyed, and it never returned.

Stephen, with bland smile, presently appeared, and asked for a cup of tea. He took no notice of the boy, who turned his back, and pretended to be absorbed in a book. He was considering whether cobbler's wax, popguns, powder in tobacco, apple-pie beds, nettle-beds, watered beds, detonating powders, booby-traps, deceptive telegrams, alarming letters, or anonymous post-card libels would give him the readiest and most complete revenge, and his enemy the greatest annoyance.

His indignation was very great when, his cup of tea finished, Stephen invited Alison to go with him to the study.

'Like him,' he cried, when the door was shut. 'Old lady, it's clear that you and me will have to pack up. You think this house big enough to hold Stephen the First Cousin once removed—bah!—and you and me, do you? That's your greenness. Mark my words. Bunk it is.'

'Nicolas, dear, pray do *not* use those vulgar words. At the same time, if I only knew how far Stephen is sincere.'

The words were wrung out of the poor lady by anxiety on her own account, and not from the habit of discussing delicate affairs with her only son. Nicolas, indeed, could not know that his mother's only income had been that granted her by Anthony Hamblin for acting as housekeeper, duenna, companion, and first lady of the establishment for Alison his daughter. And as yet she did not know, and was still prayerfully considering, the possible limitations of the new guardian's powers.

'I am going to ask you, Alison,' said Stephen, 'to assist me in going through some of your father's letters and papers. We must do it, and it will save me the feeling of—of—prying into things if you will help me with the letters. Not to-night, you know. It will take several days to go through them all.'

Alison acceded, and Stephen began opening the drawers and desks and taking out the papers, to show her the nature of the task before them.

A man of fifty, if he be of methodical habits, has accumulated a tolerable pile of papers, of all kinds. A City man's papers are generally a collection of records connected with money. Anthony Hamblin was no exception to the rule. He had kept diaries, journals, bills, and receipts with that thoughtfulness which belongs especially to rich men. They have already made their money, they know what it is worth, they are careful not to lose it, and they are determined to get good value for it if they can. Men who are still piling up the dollars are much less careful. The bulk of the papers consisted of such documents. Besides them, there were bundles of Alison's letters.

'Alison,' said Stephen, softly, 'here are your early letters tied up. Take them. It would be like prying into your little secrets to read them.'

She laughed, and then sighed.

'Here are more bills,' she said, 'and here are papers marked "I O U." As for my letters, anybody might read them.'

'Of course—of course. At the same time, you may give me those I O U's.'

He exchanged a bundle of childish letters for a roll, docketed and endorsed, which Alison gave him.

He opened the packet with a curious smile.

'Ah!' he said, 'twenty years old.' He rapidly selected those which bore his own name, and placed them aside. 'These are a form of receipt. I see your cousin Alderney Codd's name among them. He was one of those who abused your father's kindness shamelessly, I think.'

Presently Stephen grew tired of sorting the papers. He

leaned back in his chair, sighed, and asked if he might take a cigar without Alison running away. She explained that her father had always smoked a cigar in the evening.

Then they drew chairs to the fire—it had been a cold day of east wind—and sat opposite each other below the portrait of the Señora. And they were both so like her! Alison thought her grandmother's eyes were resting sadly on Stephen.

'Did Anthony, your father,' asked Stephen, after a pretty long silence, 'ever speak to you about his testamentary dispositions?'

'No, never.'

'He never told you of his intention as regards myself—you know that it was always intended that the injury done me under my father's will should be repaired by Anthony.'

'I did not know,' said Alison, 'that there had been any injury: but I suppose my cousin Augustus knows.'

'There seems to have been no will, so that the carrying out of your father's wishes'—Stephen said this carelessly, as if there could be no doubt what they were—'will devolve entirely upon you. Fortunately, I have a note, somewhere, of his proposed intentions.'

It was an inspiration, and he immediately began to consider how much he might ask for.

'Of course my father's wishes will be law to me,' Alison said, with a little break in her voice.

'Naturally,' Stephen replied, with solemnity. 'You know, I suppose, something of the fortune which you will inherit?'

'No; I have never asked.'

'I know'—Stephen had pondered over it for years—'the personalty will be sworn under two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. The real property consists of the little estate in Sussex, this house and garden, and a few other houses. Then there are the pictures, furniture, books, and collections: you are a very fortunate girl. If I had all the money——' He stopped and hesitated. 'If I had had it twenty years ago, when Alderney Codd and I were young fools together, I dare say it would have gone on the turf, or in lansquenet, baccarat, and hazard. A very good thing, Alison, that the fortune went to the steady one.'

He laughed and tossed his head with so genial and careless a grace that Alison's heart was entirely won. She put out her hand timidly, and took his.

'Dear Uncle Stephen,' she said, 'he did not see enough of you in the old days. We were somehow estranged. You did not let us know you. Promise me that you will relieve me of some part of this great load of money.'

'Poor Alison!' Stephen replied, blowing a beautiful hori-

zontal circle of blue smoke into the air, 'you overrate the spending capacities of your fortune. They are great, but not inexhaustible. Still I am not above helping you, provided my demands fall well within your father's expressed intentions.'

What could be more honourable than this? and who was to know that Stephen was at the very moment considering at what figure he could put those intentions?

Then he changed the subject.

'I hope,' he said softly, 'that we may find something among all these papers that will tell us of your mother.'

'My father never spoke of her,' said Alison. 'It seems hard that I am never to know anything about my own mother and her relations—not even to know when and how she died.'

'It *is* hard,' replied Stephen. 'And your father never spoke of her, not even to you?'

'Never, except once, when he warned me solemnly that I must never speak of her.'

'It is very strange!' Stephen sat up and laid aside his cigar. 'Tell me your earliest recollections, Alison. Let us see if something cannot be made out.'

'I remember,' said the girl, 'the sea, and Brighton, and Mrs. Duncombe. Nobody ever came to see me except papa. We knew no one. Mrs. Duncombe did not tell me anything except that my mother was dead. Then, when I was ten years of age, papa came and took me away.'

'Why did he hide you so long?'

'I did not ask him. I was too happy to be with him always. Yes, he said that he could not get on without me any longer. That made me happier still.'

'I see,' Stephen answered reflectively. 'Of course it did. Naturally. But it made you no wiser.'

'I suppose papa had a reason. I have sometimes thought that he must have married beneath him, and that he did not wish me to know my mother's relations.'

'Yes; that is possible.'

He mused in silence for a while, and presently lifted his head. Somehow his face was changed. The light had gone out of his eyes; they were hard; his voice was harsh and grating; his manner was constrained.

'I have kept you too long over business details,' he said, rising and holding out his hand. 'Good-night, Alison. If I find any documents that will interest you, I will set them aside. Take your own letters. I shall learn nothing from them, that is very certain.'

It was the old, harsh, ungracious Stephen Hamblin whom she had always known. What was the matter with him?

When Anthony, ten years before, brought home with him

unexpectedly, and without preparing anybody's mind for such an apparition, a little girl whom he introduced as his daughter, there was no one more surprised than Stephen, or more disgusted. He had regarded himself as the heir to the Hamblin estates and wealth. He had pleased his selfish spirit in imagining himself the successor: only one life between himself and this great fortune. His brother was eight years his senior. He might drop off any day, though it is not usual for men in their forties to drop off suddenly. Still it was on the cards, and Stephen Hamblin was by no means above desiring the death of any man who stood between himself and the sun. And then came this girl, this unlooked-for, inopportune girl, with the ungrateful assurance that Anthony was a widower, and this was his child. It was not in nature that such a man should receive in a spirit of meekness such a blow. Stephen hated the girl. As he grew older, and became, through his own wastefulness, entirely dependent on his brother, he hated her more and more, daily saying to himself that if it had not been for her he would have been the heir. Yet he might have known that no insurance company, which could have got at the facts, would consider his life as so good as his brother's, although there were eight years between them.

At first he accepted Anthony's statement. The girl was his child; his wife was dead: no use asking any more questions. There was nothing left but to sulk.

Then suspicions awakened in his mind. Who was the girl's mother? When had Anthony married her?

He had encouraged these suspicions, and brooded over them, until they assumed in his mind almost the shape and distinct outline of certainty. He was wronged and cheated by his brother, because, he declared to himself, his brother could never have been married at all. Such a man could never have had such a secret. But time passed on, and he forgot his old suspicions. At his brother's death they did not at first return.

He belonged, by nature, to the fine old order of murdering uncles. He could have been a rival Richard the Third; yet the softening touch of civilisation prevented him from so disposing of his niece. Then the partners' proposal seemed to offer some sort of compromise; and he thought he would arrange with his niece, on her coming of age, for some solid grant, 'in accordance with her father's expressed intentions.' Plenty of time to put them on paper. Plenty of time.

Now, the old dream came back to him. It returned suddenly. The talk with Alison revived it. He lay back in his easy-chair when she was gone, and gave the reins to a vigorous imagination. He saw, in his dream, the girl dispossessed, because her father was never married: he saw her taken away by some

newly-found relations, quite common people who let lodgings, say, at Ford or Hackney. And he saw himself in actual possession : a rich man, with the way of life still stretching far before him.

'Forty-five,' he said, 'is the true time for enjoyment. Hang it! we take our fling too early; if we only knew, we should reserve ourselves till five-and-thirty at earliest. Why do they let the young fellows of one-and-twenty fling themselves away, waste and spend, get rid of their money and their health, before they know what pleasure means? One must be forty before the full flavour comes into the cup of life. I shall enjoy—I shall commit no excesses, but I shall enjoy.'

'I suppose I shall be senior partner in the house. Well, I will stay there long enough to sack those respectable Christians, my cousins. They shall go out into the cold, where they sent me.'

He helped himself to soda and brandy, and took a fresh cigar. His imagination still flowed along in a rich and copious stream. 'As for this house, I shall sell it up. What is the good of such a house to me? Pictures, bric-à-brac, water-colours, engravings, plate—I shall get rid of all. I want nothing but my set of chambers in Pall Mall, with a private hansom and a smart boy. Alderney Codd may come to see me, now and then. None of the rest. Flora Cridland and her pink and white brat may go to the devil. And as for Alison, I suppose I shall have to make her an allowance. Yes. I will certainly make her an allowance.'

He felt so virtuous as he made this resolution that he became thirsty again, and proceeded no further until he had taken off the greater portion of a second soda and brandy.

Then he sat down and resumed his dream.

'Yes. Alison shall have an allowance. The world shall not say that I am stingy and treat her badly. How much? I should say five hundred a year, paid quarterly, would well meet the case. Just what they propose to give me.'

He thought a little over this, because it was an important thing to decide, and drank more brandy and soda.

'These cigars of Anthony's are quite the best I ever smoked,' he said. 'I shall not sell them. Nor the wine. Nor the brandy, by Jove!' He filled another glass of brandy and soda. 'Five hundred a year is too much, altogether too much for a girl in such a position. I think anybody will say I have done the thing handsomely if I make it three. Yes, three hundred a year will be an ample—a generous allowance.'

Then he went on thinking and drinking alternately. The dream was the most delicious flight of fancy he had ever essayed.

'Three hundred!' he murmured sweetly. 'Too much. It would only tempt adventurers on the look-out for a girl with money. What she requires is to have her actual wants supplied. And that,' he said with firmness, 'is what Alison, poor girl! shall have from me. Her position is certainly not her own fault. A hundred pounds a year. Two pounds a week! Why, it means more than three thousand pounds at three per cent. Three thousand pounds! Quite a large slice out of the cake. A really handsome sum.'

CHAPTER X.

WHAT STEPHEN PROPOSED.

THIS was the dream of a night. Morning, especially if it be cold, rainy, and uncomfortable morning, brings awaking and reality. Stephen awoke and realised. He remembered the evening's dream with a shudder which came of shame. He looked upon leaden clouds, rain-beaten, bare branches, and plashy lawns, and he was ashamed of his ready enthusiasm.

Morning always found Stephen Hamblin sad. It is the way with men whose joys belong entirely to the town. In the morning he was at his worst in looks and in temper. The bald temples seemed to cover a larger area of skull, the tuft of black hair which remained in the middle seemed smaller, and his eyes seemed closer together. Morning, with such men, is the time for evil deeds.

He breakfasted alone, and then dragged out all the papers and spread them before him. He would, at least, learn all that was to be learned, and at once. Absurd to go on dreaming impossibilities.

And yet, in one form or the other, the dream had been with him so long that it was hard to put it aside.

The documents divided themselves into three classes. There were the letters—Alison had already taken away her own: there were the papers relating to private accounts, small but continuous loans to Alderney Codd, himself, and others; and there were the diaries and journals year by year. The lawyers had gone through them before and taken away the more important papers. But still there was a great pile left.

Stephen had already carelessly turned over the letters. He now devoted himself to a rigid and thorough reading of every scrap of paper.

This took him more than one day. At the close of the first

day's work he laid down the last read paper with a sigh of satisfaction, because he had as yet arrived at nothing. The results he wished to secure were chiefly negative results. There was not one hint, so far as he had got, of any love business at all. If there were letters from women, they were letters from people in distress, asking for money: if there were any reference at all to marriages, they were those of persons entirely unconnected with the matter which interested Stephen.

Stephen was, in one sense, disappointed. What he would have rejoiced to find—evidence of an *amourette* without a ring—he had not found. But, on the other hand, there was no evidence of any love-passages at all, which was clear gain.

He went up to town, dined at the club, sat late after dinner, slept at his chambers in Pall Mall, and returned to Clapham on the following morning.

Here he renewed his researches.

This day he spent among the miscellaneous documents. Here were his own early I O U's—of late years this unmeaning ceremony had been abandoned—for prudence' sake, he tied these all up together and placed them in his own pocket. Nothing so hopelessly valueless as one of his own I O U's, and yet, for many reasons, nothing more desirable to get hold of. There were several, too, from Alderney Codd, which he also put together by themselves for future use. Alderney might be influenced by means of them, he thought, with some shadowy idea about threatening that most impecunious of men and fellows.

The same day he began the study of the voluminous diaries.

Anthony Hamblin, brought up under the strict rule of an old-fashioned merchant, was taught very early to be methodical. He became, by long practice, methodical in all his ways. He not only kept carefully, and endorsed all receipts, letters, and documents, down to the very play-bills, the dinner-bills, the hotel-bills, the luncheon-bills, but he actually entered in a big diary, one of the biggest procurable, all the simple daily occurrences of his life. Thus, the record of the day would appear as follows:

'April 1, 18—.—Letters: from Stephen, asking for a loan of £25—sent the cheque: from the vicar, urging a continuance of my subscription to the schools—wrote to renew it: from the Secretary of the Society for Providing Pensions for Aged Beadles—put the letter in the basket: from the Hospital for Incurable Cats—sent half a guinea—see disbursements for month. Promised Alison a box at the opera: into town: saw Augustus on business matters: lunched at the City Club—more champagne than is safe in the middle of the day: saw Alderney Codd. Lent him £10 for a fortnight: took his I O U

for the amount: did no work in the afternoon: walked all the way home: strolled on the Common with Alison till dinner-time: the dean and his daughters to dinner. Study at eleven: read till twelve.'

This was the harmless chronicle of small things kept by the great City merchant. It was the journal of a man who was contented with life, was anxious about nothing, hoped for nothing strongly, had always found the road smooth, and was conscious that his lot was an enviable one. In Stephen's eyes it had one special merit: it accounted for every hour of the day. All Anthony Hamblin's life was there.

There were six-and-thirty of these volumes. Anthony had begun the first under the supervision of an exact and methodical father, when he entered the office at sixteen. What Stephen looked for and feared to find, would probably occur somewhere about the sixteenth volume. Yet, taking every precaution, Stephen began with the earliest and read straight on.

The expression of his face as he toiled through page after page of these journals, suggested contempt and wonder. With his dark eyes, almost olive-tint, and once clear-cut features, now rather swollen, he looked something like Mephistopheles, gone a little elderly, and showing signs of an indulgent life. Certainly that hero of the stage could not more unmistakably have shown his contempt for such a record. Some men would have been moved to admiration at a life so blameless; others would have been moved to love and gratitude, finding their own name constantly mentioned, and always accompanied by a gift; others would have felt sympathy with so much paternal affection as appeared in the later volumes. Stephen, for his part, was unconsciously engaged in comparing his own life, step by step, as he went on, with that before him. He rejoiced in the contrast: on the one side were peace and calm, on the other red-hot pleasures: the 'roses and rapture of life' for himself, and the insipidity of domestic joy for Anthony. History, to be sure, is not made by men of Anthony's stamp, because history is entirely a record of the messes and miseries incurred by people in consequence of their ignorance and the wickedness of their rulers. One thing of importance: there was no mention at all of any love-passages, to say nothing of any marriage. Yet Alison must have had a mother, and there could be no doubt that she was Anthony's own daughter. The resemblance to his mother was enough to prove it.

Presently the reader came upon a line which interested him. 'By Jove!' he said, 'I wonder what he says about Newbury?'

There was a good deal about Newbury but not apparently what the reader expected.

'I thought he would have written something more about Dora,' said Stephen.

He now read more carefully, as if he suspected something might happen about this time. To begin with, it was now only a year before Alison's birth, yet nothing was said. The entries were candid and frank; there was no hint at concealment; there seemed nothing to be concealed. The reader turned over page after page in anxiety which was fast becoming feverish. The holiday at Newbury seemed terminated, like all the rest, by return to London; not a word afterwards about Dora Nethersole. The autumn and winter were spent at Clapham and in the City as usual: in the spring Anthony went for a month to the south of France, his companion being that most respectable of the cousins, the dean. He returned in early summer; in the autumn he went to Bournemouth. The reader's face clouded. He read on more anxiously. There was a gap of four weeks, during which there was no entry. You who have read Miss Nethersole's manuscript know how the time was spent. After that interval the journal went on. 'Returned to town, saw Stephen, told him what I thought fit.'

'What he thought fit!' echoed Stephen. 'Then he kept something back. What could that be?'

Then the journal returned to its accustomed grooves, save that there was an entry which appeared every month, and seemed mysterious. 'Sent £8 to Mrs. B.' Who was Mrs. B.? In the journal, S. stood for Stephen, A. C. for Alderney Codd, F. for Mrs. Cridland, and so on. But who was Mrs. B.?

This entry was continued with no further explanation for three years. Then there appeared the following:

'June 13.—Went to fetch away A. Took her by train to Brighton. Gave her over to the custody of Mrs. D.'

'A.' must have been Alison.

After that the references made to 'A.' became so frequent as to leave no doubt. He went to Brighton to see 'A.' She was growing tall; she was growing pretty; she was like his mother. Not a word said about her own. She had the Hamblin face. And so on.

There was certainly small chance of finding anything in the later diaries, but there might be some mention of the deceased wife's relations. Stephen persevered.

There was none. The book was full of Alison. The man's affection for his daughter was surprising. To Stephen it seemed silly.

He laid down the last of the volumes with a sigh of relief.

So far, in a set of thirty journals and diaries carefully kept from day to day, there was only one gap, a modest little four weeks' interval in which Anthony had been to Bournemouth.

'What,' thought Stephen again, 'did he hide when he told me about his Bournemouth journey?'

Then he thought of another chance.

He remembered the great family Bible, bound in solid leather, which contained the whole genealogy of the Hamblins from the birth of the earliest Anthony.

He knew where to find it, and opened it with a perceptible beating of the heart.

There were the names of Anthony and himself, the last two of the elder line. *No addition had been made.* There was no entry of Anthony's marriage. The two brothers stood on the page with space after them to record their respective marriages and death. But there was no further record. Like the journals, the Bible was silent.

'Alison,' he said, 'is certainly Anthony's child. For that matter, no one ever doubted it. For some reason, he wished to hide the place of her birth and the name of her mother. Why? Two reasons suggest themselves. One, that he was never married at all. Unlike Anthony, that. The second, that he desired to conceal the marriage. Why, again? Possibly, because he was ashamed of his wife's people. Unlike Anthony; very much unlike Anthony. Or he might have married under an assumed name; also unlike Anthony. In which case,'—here Stephen smiled gratefully and benignantly—'it might be absolutely impossible to prove the marriage.'

But mostly Stephen inclined to the no-marriage theory. A secret *liaison* commended itself to him as the most probable way of accounting for the whole business. To be sure, one easily believes what is the best for one's own interest.

'Anthony,' he said, 'would be eager to destroy, as effectually as possible, every trace of the presumably brief episode. No doubt he wished that no one should even suspect its existence. That is the way with your virtuous men. But he could not efface his own daughter, and did not wish to try. Hence the shallow artifice of pretending that her mother had died in childbirth. And that must be the reason, too, of Anthony's disinclination to make a will, in which he would have had to declare the whole truth.'

At this point of the argument Stephen grew red-hot with indignation. No Roman satirist, no vehement orator of eloquent antiquity, could be more wrathful, more fiery with passion, than himself. His face glowed with virtue. He was the Christian who did well to be angry.

'What an impudent, what a shameful attempt,' he cried, 'to defraud the rightful heir! Was it possible that an elder brother could be so base? But he was mistaken,' said Stephen, rubbing his hands. 'He was mistaken! He reckoned without

me. He did not count on my suspicions. He thought he should hoodwink me with all the rest of them. Why, I knew it all along. He forgot that he had to do with a man of the world.'

Certainly Stephen knew one side of the world extremely well: it was the Seamy Side.

After this examination there was no longer any doubt in his mind; he was resolved. At the fitting moment, after a little preparation, he would present himself in the character of sole heir and claimant of the whole estate. But there must be a little preparation first.

'As for what my cousins say or think,' he said, 'I care not one brass farthing. Nor, for that matter, do I care for what all the world says and thinks. But it is as well to have general opinion with one.'

It would be well, he thought, to begin, after the manner of the ancients, the German political press and Russian diplomatists, by scattering abroad ambiguous words.

He made no more appearances at the domestic circle as the benevolent guardian. And he ceased sending polite messages to Alison.

He began to sow the seeds of distrust in the mind of honest Alderney Codd, who, but for him, would certainly have never suspected evil. Of all the many classifications of mankind, there is none more exhaustive than that which divides humanity into those who do not and those who do think evil, those who believe in motives noble and disinterested, and those who habitually attribute motives low, sordid, and base. Needless to say that Stephen belonged, in his capacity of man of the world, to the latter. There are sheep, and there are goats: the man of the world prefers the goats.

He invited Alderney to dine with him at Clapham, stating that it would be a bachelor's dinner for themselves. In fact, dinner was served in the study. Alderney arrived, clad still in the gorgeous coat with the fur lining. He was punctual to time—half-past seven—and found Stephen apparently hard at work behind a great pile of papers on a side-table.

'These are a few,' he said, looking up and greeting his cousin, just a few of the papers connected with the estate, which I have to go through.'

'Oh!' said Alderney, with sympathy. 'Poor Anthony will cut up, I hear, better than was expected even.'

Stephen nodded mysteriously.

'You have heard, perhaps, that I am to take out letters of administration. There was no will, but of course I am the nearest friend of this poor bereaved girl.'

Alderney was rather astonished at this expression of sym-

pathy and so much grief, after an interval of so many weeks. Many brothers dry up, so to speak, in a fortnight at latest. Most brothers cease to use the language of grief after a month.

'Yes; it is very sad, but Alison won't go on crying for ever, I suppose?'

'Don't be brutal, Alderney. Pretend to sympathy if you can't feel any. You were always inclined to look on things from so hard a point of view.'

This, again, was astonishing. Alderney sat down meekly, and began to wish that dinner would come.

'I thought,' he said presently, while Stephen went on making notes and turning over leaves, 'that the lawyers relieved you of all the work.'

'My dear fellow!' with gentle surprise. 'Impossible. They take care of the details, and do the necessary legal work. I have, however, to master the general situation. The guardians, executors, and trustees have all the responsibility, nearly all the work, and none of the profit.' This was ungrateful, considering the five hundred a year. 'But of course, for the poor child's sake, one must not flinch from undertaking it.'

Alderney was more surprised than ever. The last time Stephen spoke to him of Alison he called her a little devil. But that, to be sure, was late in the evening, when he was lamenting her existence.

'It is very creditable to you,' said Alderney, warmly. 'You have the same kind heart as your brother. I feared from what you said once before that you bore poor Alison a grudge for ever having been born, which is a thing that no girl should be blamed for.'

'Alderney,' said Stephen, 'you ought to know better than to rake up an old thing said in a bad temper. Alison has now become my especial, my sacred charge.'

Alderney Codd stroked his chin, noticing as he did so that the frayed condition of his cuffs was really beyond everything —and began to be more confounded than ever. He wished they would bring dinner. That Stephen Hamblin should acknowledge any duty, and act upon that recognition; that he should acknowledge anything sacred, and square his conduct accordingly, was to Alderney like a new revelation; and yet Stephen appeared in perfect health. So he only coughed—an involuntary expression of incredulity—and said nothing.

'What a task,' said Stephen, 'what a melancholy, yet profitable, task it is going through the simple records of a blameless life like my brother Anthony's. You think with me, Alderney, that his life was really a blameless one?'

'Surely,' said Alderney, almost ready by this time to believe that Stephen must be an awakened and converted vessel, and

feeling some natural anxiety on his own personal behalf lest the complaint might be contagious—'surely The very best man who ever lived. Many is the fiver I have borrowed of him. So far even as a tenner went, indeed, I always regarded Anthony as a safe draw ; but, as a regular rule, not more than that at a time, and not more than once a month or so. And it was best to vary the place, the time, and the emergency. Dear me! to think that I have borrowed the last fiver from him that I shall ever get! Where shall we find another lender so free and so forgetful?'

'You can always rely on me, Alderney,' said Stephen, slowly and sadly, 'for that amount at least.'

'God bless my soul!' cried Alderney, bewildered beyond power of control by this sudden conversion. 'Has anything happened to you, Stephen? You haven't got some internal complaint?'

Stephen was still sitting at the table, with a three-quarter face lit by the fire. The room was dark, and his hard features, suffused by the rosy light, looked gentle and kind. Who, up till now, had ever heard of Stephen Hamblin lending anyone a single penny?

'I have been searching among these papers,' he went on, still in the same slow, sad way, without noticing Alderney's extraordinary question, 'for some evidence—say, rather, some record—of my brother's marriage. Alison is nearly twenty years of age. Here, for instance, is a bundle of papers which refer to a time before her birth. Plenty of diaries of that date are here before me. Oddly enough, I find here no mention of any marriage. Yet Anthony was a most methodical man, and one would think must have made somewhere a careful record of an important event such as his marriage. Here again'—he took up a thick volume and opened it at random—'is a diary of that time. Anything seems set down. "Advanced to Alderney Codd, £25." And here is even your I O U.'

'Really!' cried Alderney, springing to his feet. 'Let me see that document. My own I O U! And for five-and-twenty! I remember it well. It was twenty years ago. We went to Paris, you and I, with the money, and we stayed there for a week. When it was all gone, you had to write to Anthony for more, to bring us home. I remember—I remember. Now this is really touching. I borrowed that money twenty years ago. Think of one's good deeds seeing the light again after so many years! It was indeed a casting of bread upon the water. I never expected to be rewarded in this manner.'

His face flushed, especially his nose, and he spoke as if his own borrowing had been the good deed thus providentially brought to light.

Then the dinner was brought up. Alderney, like all thin men, was blessed with a regular and trustworthy appetite. There was little conversation during the dinner, which was good. When it was all over, and nothing more remained but the wine, the two men turned their chairs to the fire, and fell to quiet talk over a bottle of 1856, out of Anthony's capacious cellar.

'I suppose,' said Stephen presently, harking back to the subject of his brother, 'that you have a very distinct recollection of poor Anthony's regular habits?'

'Why, any man would remember so regular a life as his.'

'True, the most methodical of men. It seems to me, Alderney, as if he knew on any day and at any time what he was then doing. This is really admirable port. I should like a bin of it.'

'Of course. Anthony moved like the hands of a clock. It *is* good wine—Falernian.'

'And yet I cannot remember, nor can I find a trace of, any week or month during which he could have gone away to be married. Take another glass, Alderney.'

'Not that it takes a week,' said Alderney, 'to be married in. You may leave the office and find a church within a stone's throw, if you like. Gad! Stephen, the thing is so easy that I wonder you and I have never been let in for it. Thank you. The decanter is with you. Full of body, isn't it?'

'The ceremony is not everything. The nosegay of this wine is perfect. You have to court your bride, I suppose; and all that takes time. And what sort of a wife would that be, content with a five minutes squeezed here and there out of the office day? Alderney, I know every holiday he ever took, where he went, with whom he went, and what he did. Ah, what a colour! For the life of me, I cannot understand when he was married.'

'It does seem odd,' said Stephen, 'now one begins to think of it. This is the inner flask. Why can't a man drink a couple of bottles of this divine liquor without getting drunk?'

'Then the death of his wife. Did he go about as if nothing had happened? How is it there is no word about it in the diaries? We can have another bottle up. And the birth of his daughter? Why is not that event entered?'

'It does seem odd.'

'So odd, Alderney, that I am going to investigate it. Do have some more port. If Anthony had been any other kind of man, if we were not all sure, quite sure in our own minds, that his life was always beyond reproach—if we could not all agree in this, I should say that he had never been married at all.'

As Stephen said these words slowly, he leaned his head upon his hand, and gazed sadly into the fire.

Alderney did not reply at first. He was taking another glass of port. Wine stimulates the perceptive faculties, but sometimes confuses the powers of speech. Presently he said, rather thickly :

'Quite—quite impossible. Anthony's the best man in the world, and there's no better port out of Cambridge.'

Alderney called next day at the offices in the city. Augustus Hamblin, apparently willing to waste a quarter of an hour with him, which was not always the case, received him and let him talk.

Alderney expatiated on the virtuous attitude of the new guardian.

'Richard the Third,' said Augustus, 'was equally full of love for his nephews.'

'Nay, nay,' cried Alderney, reproachfully, 'Stephen is in earnest. He is a new man.'

'Perhaps,' said Augustus. 'We have, however, cut his nails pretty short. New man or old, he will do no mischief to the estate.'

'Well,' Alderney went on, 'it is very odd, but Stephen can find no trace of Anthony's marriage, which was always, you know, a very mysterious affair. He must have married somebody.'

'Yes,' said Augustus confidently, though his brow clouded ; 'of course, somebody. What does it matter ?'

'Stephen says that if Anthony had been a different kind of man, unless we were all agreed that he was the best of men, we might be inclined to think that he was never married at all.'

The words went home. Augusta felt a sudden pang of fear and surprise. Stephen would in that case be the sole heir.

'A changed man, is he ?' he asked. 'Upon my word, Alderney, I suspect he is exactly the same man as he always has been : not changed a bit.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIRCH-TREE TAVERN.

Among the City clubs is a small and little-known association which meets informally on every day of the week and all the year round, between the hours of two and five in the afternoon.

There are no rules in this club : it has no ballot-box : nobody is ever blackballed, nobody is ever proposed, nobody is ever elected : there is no subscription—if there were, the club would instantly dissolve : and it is nameless. It is, however, felt by the members to be a very real and existing club, a place where they may be sure of meeting their friends, an institution to which only those resort who are bound together by the common ties of like pursuits.

This place of meeting is the Birch-Tree Tavern, which stands in one of the narrow streets leading southwards out of Cornhill. Its situation, therefore, is central, in the very heart of London. It is a simple house of refreshment, which, like all the City places, is full of life between one and three, and before or after those hours is dull and empty. When the hungry clerks have all disappeared, when the jostling waiters have left off carrying, taking orders, and bawling, when the boys have ceased to balance among the mob their piles of plates and dishes, when the compartments are all empty, a great calm falls upon the place, broken only by the buzz of conversation of the men who are always lounging over a London bar : by the occasional click of the billiard balls, and by the distant murmur from the room where the members of the club are holding their daily conference. If you ask for anything at this place after four, the waiters collect together to gaze upon you in pity ; and if at half-past five, they receive your orders with contumely or even eject you with violence.

The Birch-Tree Tavern, the glories of which belong perhaps to the times when the new and splendid restaurant was unknown, consists of several houses, or parts of houses. Many years ago these had behind them little yards, each four feet broad by twenty long, where rubbish could be shot, where cats could practise gymnastics, and where the melancholy moss, which can live without sunshine, dragged on a monotonous existence. But the walls of the yards are taken down, the space between the houses roofed over, and the ground thus reclaimed has been made into a bar and a luncheon table. If you go upstairs and turn to the left hand, first door on the first floor, you will find yourself in the room affected by the members of this nameless club.

They arrive between one and two o'clock in the day ; they find a row of tables on one side of the room, spread with table-cloths, which are white on Monday ; here they dine. After dinner they adjourn to a row of tables without table-cloths, on the other side, near the windows, which are adorned with nothing but lucifer-matches in their native caskets. Here they join their friends, and sit talking over fragrant tobacco, and whisky-and-water, till afternoon deepens into evening—in other words, until the waiter turns them out.

Where do they go when they leave the Birch-Tree Tavern?

That is a question to which there is no reply. They used to show a man at the Stilton Cheese who sat in that place every day of his life from four o'clock till seven, except on Sunday, when he was supposed to lie in bed till six; he then went to the Coach and Four, where he remained until nine; after that, he repaired to the Albion, where he finished his monotonous day of perpetual thirst, for during the whole of that time he drank whisky-and-water gaily.

The members of this club began to drink earlier than this hero. In all probability, therefore, they left off earlier. It does not seem in nature, for instance, to drink whisky-and-water from two till six, and then to finish with another sitting from six till eleven afterwards. Perhaps they went home and had tea and read good books; perhaps they went to bed at once; perhaps they sat in solitude and reflected; perhaps they sat like mediums waiting for a communication. I do not know, nor did the members of this club know, because their acquaintance with each other began and ended at the tavern, what they did in the evening.

Men who pursue secret, tortuous, or mysterious methods of making money, always meet their fellow-labourers in certain taverns. One class of ingenious adventurers, which turns its attentions to the fluctuations of foreign stock, may be seen whispering together—they all whisper—in a certain underground place where they keep wonderful sherry at eighteen-pence a glass; it is a sherry which unlocks all hearts. Others, who take an interest in the railways of the foreigner, may be seen at the Whittington, an agreeable little place, where they put you into little boxes, four feet square, with walls eight feet high. Here the guests sit like conspirators and discuss their secrets; sometimes you may see one more suspicious than the rest, peering over the partition-wall to see if the occupiers of the next place are likely to be listeners. At Binn's again, you will find in the ordinary compartments, German Jews who can tell you all about the price of diamonds and the rise of bullion. They are safe from listeners because they are talking their own language which is Schmoozum, and no one understands that except themselves.

The men who used the Birch-Tree Tavern were all of them engaged perpetually in the formation, the promotion, the floating of new companies. To conceive the idea of a new company; to give it such a name as would attract; to connect it with popular objects; to draw up a flaming prospectus, showing how the profits *must* be five-and-twenty, and would most likely be cent. per cent.; to receive fully paid up shares, in reward for the idea and the preliminary work; to realise upon them

when the shares were at their highest, and before the smash—this was the golden dream of men who frequented that first-floor room. They were always occupied with designs—hatching new ideas, abandoning old. They listened with the utmost eagerness to each other's ideas. They believed in them more than in their own, envied their possession, marvelled at their own bad luck, in not hitting upon them for themselves; and they pleased themselves with stories about great strokes of good fortune.

They are not an unkindly set of men. They do not steal each other's ideas, or try to anticipate them. Their faces lack the hawk-like look of professional turf men and gamblers. They all love to lounge and talk. Their calling makes them perhaps inclined to be dreamy and imaginative. One would not claim for them the highest standard of moral excellence, but certainly when the imagination is allowed fair play, the habits of the bird of prey are seldom found. Now the rook is an eminently practical, and not an imaginative, bird.

I am far from asserting that these gentlemen are models of morality. On the contrary, they have no morality; such a thing does not exist in the lower flights of financing, whatever may be the case with the higher. They are positively without morals on this side of their character. They consider nothing about a company, except to inquire how the idea can be so presented as to attract the general public. Whether it is a snare and a delusion, whether the formation of such a company is a dishonest trading on the credulity of the ignorant, whether the traffic in its shares is not a mere robbery and plunder—these are things which the small projectors neither inquire into nor care for, nor would understand.

One of the most regular frequenters of the tavern was Mr Alderney Codd. Since the age of eight-and-twenty—since the time, that is, when he made that little arrangement, of which we have spoken, with his creditors—he has been engaged in the active, but hitherto unsuccessful, pursuit of other people's money, by the promotion of risky companies. How he fell into this profession, by what successive steps this lay fellow of St. Alphege's became a promoter of companies, it is needless here to tell. He was in the profession, which is the important thing, and he was greatly respected in it, partly on account of his fertile imagination, which perpetually led him to devise new openings, and partly because he was supposed able to 'influence' capital. Next to a capitalist comes the man who can influence capital. Was he not cousin to the Hamblins of Great St. Simon Apostle? Was he not hand-in-hand with Stephen, the younger brother, who was not in the firm, yet was supposed to be possessed of great wealth, and was always hanging about

in the city? Was he not, again, a private friend of the successful Mr. Bunter Baker, commonly known as Jack Baker?

It was nothing that Alderney Codd was shabby and poor: they were all poor, and most of them were shabby. The important thing was that he could influence capital directly, while the rest of them had to work crab-fashion towards the attainment of their objects—to crawl up back stairs, to take into their confidence a go-between, whose commission sopped up most of their profits. Another thing in Alderney's favour was that he was undoubtedly a University man, a Fellow of his college, reputed to be a great scholar—a thing which always commands respect. Lastly, Alderney had once, some years before, actually made a great *coup*. He always told the story at the tavern whenever any stranger appeared in the circle—it was a privilege accorded to him; and the rest were never tired of hearing the story.

'It was in the early days of trams,' he said, when he had led the conversation artfully to the right moment for introducing the story; 'the early days of trams. Not but what there is a good deal to be done in trams, even now, by a man who keeps his eyes open; and I would recommend anybody here who has time in his hands, and a little money for preliminary expenses' (here their jaws fell), 'to consider the subject of trams applied to our towns. My town was no other than—Valparaiso.' Alderney Codd at this point would look round with an air of triumph, as if real genius was shown in the selection of a town so remote from Cornhill. 'Valparaiso. It is a city which has a fine trade, and—and—well, I thought the idea of a tram in Valparaiso would possibly attract. Had it been Bristol, or Birmingham, no one would have touched it; but to lend money to a foreign enterprise in those good days when people were credulous—ah, well!' Alderney Codd sighed, 'we may well, like Horace, praise the past time, because it will never come again.' Alderney's allusions to the classical authors, like his quotations, would not always bear inspection. 'I conceived this idea, however. I have, as our friends know, some little influence over capital. I drew up the prospectus of that company; I introduced that company in certain quarters; I floated that company; I received five thousand pounds in fully-paid shares; the shares were taken; they ran up; I had the happiness to sell out when they were at seventy per cent. premium, a fortnight before the company smashed. As for the tram, gentlemen, it never was made, in consequence of a dispute with the municipality. However, it was not my fault; and I believe, gentlemen, I may call that transaction, business—"*quocunque modo, rem*," as Horace says.'

Alderney generally stopped here. Had he gone on, he would

have to explain that it was Stephen Hamblin who helped in starting this disastrous company, the name of which still brings tears of rage and bitterness to the eyes of many a country clergyman and poor maiden lady; he would have explained, further, that it was in consequence of acting further on Stephen's advice that he subsequently lost the whole. For he invested it in a new American railway. The prospectus, beautifully emblazoned with arms of the State, mottos, gilded emblems and effigies of the almighty dollar, set forth that this line of Eldorado, this railway of Golconda, this iron road of Ophir, ran through diamond fields, silver mines, gold mines, rich *ranchos* boasting of ten thousand cattle: past meadows smiling—nay, grinning—with perpetual crops; through vineyards whose grapes were better for pressing and fermenting than any on the Johannisberg or belonging to the Château Lafitte; and among a population numerous as the ants in an ant-hill, prosperous as an Early Engineer, and as rich as Nebuchadnezzar, Vanderbilt, or Mr. Stewart. It ran, or passed, from one place not marked in any English map to another not marked on any English map—from one to another world-centre, both shamefully passed over and neglected by Mr. Stanford's young men. It was elaborately explained that, beside the enormous passenger traffic in this densely-populated country, there would be expected from the extraordinary wealth of the territory, as above indicated, a great and rapidly-increasing goods business. Figures showed that the least which holders of ordinary stock in this railway could expect would be twenty-five per cent. The shares of the new railway were placed upon the markets. Alderney Codd's money was all, by Stephen's advice, invested in them. He unfortunately let go the golden opportunity, which Stephen embraced, of selling all he held when the shares were at their highest, and was involved in the general ruin when it was discovered that there was no town at all within hundreds of miles of the place, that there were no people except one or two in a log hut, that there would be no passenger traffic, and no conveyance of goods. Alderney, unfortunately, like all his friends, believed in other people's companies. He promoted what he knew to be a bubble, but he accepted all other bubbles for what they professed to be. And bubbles always profess to be solid pudding: such is their playful way.

Perhaps Alderney's popularity was due in great measure to his personal qualities. He was a good-hearted man; he never ascribed evil, or thought evil, though his manner of life would have been, had Providence allowed him to float many of his bubble companies, as mischievous, tortuous, and shady as that of an Egyptian Viceroy. He took everybody into his confidence, and, with a sublime trust in human nature which nothing

could ever destroy, he imparted profound secrets to the acquaintance of an hour, who in his turn not unfrequently revealed mysteries of the most startling and confidential description to him. Men who talk to strangers at bars have few secrets, and are very candid. Then Alderney never forgot a face or a friend; he had an excellent memory; he was always cheerful, even sanguine, and was never mean. To be sure he was a lavish borrower, a very prodigal in borrowing; he would ask for a ten-pound note and take a crown piece; and he never, unless when he borrowed among his own set, remembered to repay.

Perhaps, again, part of his popularity was due to his face. This was thin and clean shaven. The mouth had an habitual smile lurking in the corners; the nose was just touched with red, which, when not carried too far, imparts benevolence of aspect; and the eyes were kindly, so that young children and old ladies were encouraged to ask him the way.

Alderney was a philanthropist whom fortune had made an enemy of mankind; he perpetually schemed and planned methods by which his fellow-creatures were to be ruined, being himself the readiest dupe, the most willing victim, in the world. Men may despise dupes, but they like the ready believer. It is delightful to find even among hawks the simplicity of the pigeon. The quack doctor buys a plenary indulgence of Tetzel, while he, in his turn, purchases a pill of the quack. The vendor of beef-fat for butter gets her fortune told by the gipsy; the gipsy buys the beef-fat on the word of the immoral young person who sells it for butter.

About the beginning of every quarter, Alderney Codd would be absent from his regular haunts; the circle at the Birch-Tree would miss him; it might be rumoured that he had gone down to Cambridge, where these honest speculators supposed that his society was still greatly in request, by reason of his being so massive a scholar. The real reason of his absence was, that he drew his hundred a year quarterly, and lay in bed half the day for two or three weeks after it. That was Alderney's idea of enjoying life if you were rich—to lie in bed. While in the first flush and pride of that five-and-twenty pounds, Alderney got up about one o'clock every day. Naturally therefore, he dined late. During this period he ceased to devise schemes; his imagination rested; his busy brain had time to turn to practical things; and such renovation in his apparel as the money ran to was accomplished during this period. When it was over, he would cheerfully return to the stand-up dinner, the half-pint of beer, and the Scotch whisky with pipes and conversation among his fellows.

Every one of the circle had a history. To be sure that is

sadly true of all mankind. I mean that these men were all out of the ordinary grooves of life. They were adventurers. Formerly they would have joined a band of free lances, to fight and plunder under the flag of a gallant knight of broken fortunes; or they would have gone a-buccaneering, and marooned many a tall ship, without caring much whether she carried Spanish colours or no. Or they might have gone skulking among the woods and shady places of England, where Savernake, Sherwood, or the New Forest, gives on to the high-road, lying in wait for unarmed travellers, in guise, as the famous dashing highwayman. Nowadays, for men of some education, no money, and small principle, there are few careers more attractive, though few less generally known, than that of small finance.

There were nine or ten of them at the tavern one afternoon in March: they had the room entirely to themselves because it was Saturday, and the general public had gone away for their half-holiday. There was, therefore, a sense of freedom and enlargement: they need not whisper.

They sat round the largest table, that under the middle window. Outside it was a charming and delicious day in very early spring, a day when the first promise comes of better times, when the air is soft and fragrant, and one reckons, like the one confiding swallow, that the winter is gone.

In this tavern the atmosphere was always the same: no fragrance of spring ever got there, no sunshine could reach the room; if the windows were ever opened, they would let in nothing but a heavy wave of air equally laden with the fumes of tobacco, spirits, and roasted meats. The men at the table, however, cared little for the breath of meadows; they loved the City air which always seemed charged with the perfumes of silver ingots and golden bars.

Among them this afternoon was one whom all regarded with a feeling which had something of awe in it; more of awe than of envy: because he was one who had succeeded. He was still a comparatively young man, rather a handsome man of two or three and thirty, with strong features, which were rather too coarse, a crop of curly brown hair, a clear complexion, and bright eyes. He was dressed with more display than quiet men generally like, but his rings and chains seemed to suit his confident braggart air. He spoke loudly, asserted himself, and in all companies pushed himself at once to the front. He was that Phœnix among City men, the man who has made every thing out of nothing, the successful man. He has a little to do with this story, and we will presently tell how he rose to greatness. His friends addressed him familiarly as Jack: everybody spoke of him behind his back as Jack Baker; on his cards was the

name of Mr. J. Bunter Baker. 'Not plain Baker,' he would say; 'we are of the Bunter Bakers, formerly of Shropshire. The arms of the two families are, however, different.'

The other men were sitting over whisky-and-water, with pipes. Jack Baker, half sitting, half leaning on the top rail of the back of his chair, was smoking a cigar, and had called for a pint of champagne. It was rumoured among his admirers that he drank no other wine except champagne.

Alderney Codd, who was still attired in the magnificent fur-lined coat, was laying down the law.

'Capitalists tell me,' he was saying, as he was on intimate terms with a great many capitalists, 'that if you have got a good thing—you will bear me out, Jack—you can't do better than bring it out. Nonsense about general depression; there is plenty of money in the world that longs to change hands.'

'Quite right,' said Mr. Bunter Baker. 'Plenty of money.'

'And plenty of confidence,' said Alderney. 'Now I've got in my pocket—here—at this actual table—a thing good enough to make the fortune of a dozen companies.'

Every project advanced at that table possessed the merit of a great and certain success—on paper.

He produced a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. All bent their heads eagerly while he toyed with the string, willing to prolong the suspense.

There is a certain public-house in Drury Lane where you will find, on any Sunday evening that you like, an assemblage of professional conjurors. They go there chiefly to try new tricks on each other, and they judge from the first exhibition before their skilled brethren, of the effect which they will produce on an uncritical public. So with Alderney. He was about to propound a new scheme to a critical circle, and he naturally hesitated. Then he turned to Mr. Bunter Baker before opening the parcel.

'I ask you, Jack, what is the first rule for him who wants to make money? Nobody ought to know better than yourself—come.

'Find out where to make it,' said Jack.

'No, not at all; make it by means of the millions. Go to the millions. Never mind the upper ten thousand. Satisfy the wants of the millions. One of those wants, one of the commonest, is appealed to by the contents of this parcel. We seek to catch the *mutabilis aura*, the changeable breath, of popular favour. The invention which I hold in my hand is so simple that the patent cannot be infringed—*flecti, non frangi;* it will be as eagerly adopted by those who drink tea, the boon of those, who, as Horace says, love the *Persicos apparatus*, or Chinese tea-tray, as by those who drink toddy; it will be used as freely

at the bar—I do not here allude to the Inns of Court—as at the family breakfast-table.'

'You need not quote your own prospectus,' said Mr. Baker. 'Get to the point, man. Let us into your secret.'

No one was really in a hurry to learn it, for, like true artists, they were criticising the manner of putting the case.

'There's nothing like a good prospectus,' said a keen and hungry-eyed man, who was listening attentively.

'And a well-placed advertisement in the *Times*,' observed a little man, whose only known belief was in the form of such an advertisement. When he had one, of his own composition, it was a red-letter day; when he had a long one, it seemed like a fortune made. Once he was so happy as to make the acquaintance of a man who reported for the *Times*. He lent that man money in perfect confidence; and though his advances were never repaid, his admiration for the paper remained unbounded.

'Cheap things for the people,' said another, with a sigh. 'See what a run my sixpenny printing-press had, though I was dished out of the profits.'

A curious point about these men was that they were always dished out of the profits whenever anything came off.

'But what is it?' asked another, taking out a notebook.

He was, among other things, connected with a certain 'practical' weekly, and was supposed to give 'publicity' to the schemes whenever he was allowed. I fear the circulation of the paper was greatly exaggerated with the view of catching advertisers.

'It is,' said Alderney, untying the parcel, 'nothing less than the substitution of glass for silver spoons. Honest glass! not pretended silver: not worthless plate. You drop one: it breaks: very good. A penny buys another.'

All eyes turned on Mr. Baker. He took one of the glass spoons: he dropped it: it was broken.

'Very true indeed,' he said. 'It is broken.'

'There are,' Alderney continued, 'seven millions of households in England; each household will require an average of fifty-five spoons: three hundred and eighty-five millions of spoons; original demand, three hundred and eighty-five millions of pence: a million and a half sterling. Not bad that, I think, for a company newly starting. Nobody can reckon the breakages—we may estimate them roughly at twelve millions a year. Think how maids bang spoons about.'

The newspaper correspondent made further notes in his pocket-book. A great hush of envy fell upon the audience. One of them seemed in for a good thing. Their eyes turned on Mr. Baker. He, too, was making a note.

'I have in *my* pocket,' said another, a man with a face so hard and practical-looking that one wondered how he had failed in making an immense fortune—'I have in my pocket a little scheme which seems to promise well.'

Everybody listened. Mr. Baker looked up from his note-book with curiosity. This emboldened the speaker.

'You all know,' he said, 'that the highways of England are studded with iron pumps, set up by beneficent governments to provide for waggon and cart-horses in the old days. I have made a calculation that there are about a hundred thousand of them; they pump no water, and they are no longer wanted. I propose to buy up these pumps—they can be had for a mere song—and sell them for scrap iron, eh? There is money in that, I think.'

Nobody replied. Mr. Baker, to whom all eyes turned, finished his champagne and went away, with a nod to Alderney.

'I must say,' said one of them angrily, 'that when we do get a capitalist here it is a pity to drive him away with a cock and a bull scheme for rooting up old pumps.'

'None of the dignity of legitimate financing about it,' said Alderney, grandly: 'we do not meet here to discuss trade; we do not stoop to traffic in scrap iron.'

Then they all proceeded to sit upon the unfortunate practical man who had driven away the capitalist.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW STEPHEN DECLARED HIS INTENTIONS.

After sowing the seeds of suspicion in the mind of the private town-crier, Alderney Codd, Stephen remained quiet for a time. Alderney the talker would unconsciously help him. This, indeed, happened; in less than a fortnight the Hamblin enemies were, with one accord, whispering to each other that no one knew where and when Anthony had been married, or, as the elder ladies added, significantly, *if at all*. But for the moment none of these whispers reached the ears of Alison.

Meantime Stephen was busy all day among the diaries and letters. He read and re-read; he examined them all, not once or twice, but ten times over, in constant fear of lighting on some clue which might lead to the reversal of his own opinion. But he found nothing.

One day, in the middle of March, about a fortnight after his

dinner with Alderney Codd, he met his cousin Augustus Hamblin in the City. Since the appointment of Stephen as guardian it had been tacitly understood that there was to be a show of friendliness on both sides. The past was to be forgotten.

'I am glad to meet you,' said Stephen, shaking hands with a show of great respect for the senior partner of the house. 'Are you so busy that you cannot give me a few minutes?'

'Surely,' replied Augustus, 'I can give you as many as you please.'

He noticed, as they walked side by side in the direction of Great St. Simon Apostle, that Stephen's face looked thoughtful, and his eyes rested on the ground. In fact, he was mentally revolving how to state the case most effectively. At present he only intended to follow up the slight uneasiness produced by Alderney's artless prattle.

'I have been intending to consult you for some time,' he began, when they were in the office, 'but things prevented.'

'Yes: pray sit down; what is it? Alison continues quite well, I hope?'

'Quite well, poor girl, thank you. I wanted to confer with you on the subject of my brother's marriage.'

Stephen looked straight in his cousin's face—a disconcerting thing to do if your friend wishes to dissemble his thoughts. Augustus changed colour. Alderney, therefore, had, as he expected, aroused a feeling of uneasiness.

'My brother's marriage,' he repeated. 'Can you tell me when and where it took place?'

'I know nothing about it,' said Augustus; 'no more than you know yourself. We none of us know anything about it.'

'Do you,' continued Stephen solemnly, as if this was a very great point, 'do you remember any time, from twenty to five-and-twenty years ago, when Anthony went away, say on a suspicious holiday, or behaved like a man with a secret, or departed in any way from his usual open way of life?'

'N—no; I cannot say that I do. He had a holiday every year in the summer or autumn. Sometimes he went away in the spring. Of course, he must have managed his marriage in one of those excursions.'

'Yes; that is not what I mean. I know the history of all those holidays. I want to find a time, if possible, when no one knew where he went. It must have been out of the usual holiday-time.'

'I remember no such time,' said Augustus. 'But of course one did not watch over Anthony's movements. He might have been married as often as Bluebeard without our suspecting a word of it.'

'No,' said Stephen, shaking his head. All this time he was

observing the greatest solemnity. 'I should have suspected it. You forget the intimacy between us. Anthony had no secrets from me, poor fellow! nor I any from Anthony.' (This was a sentimental invention which pleased Stephen and did not impose upon Augustus, who knew that Stephen's life had many secrets.) 'Had Anthony hidden anything from me, his manner would have led to my suspecting. Again, I have read through his private journal, and there is nothing, not one word, about any marriage—no hint about any love affair at all; nothing is altered or erased; he tells his own life hour by hour. This is very mysterious.'

'Better let the mystery sleep,' said Augustus, quietly. 'No one will disturb it if you do not.'

'What!' said Stephen, with a show of virtuous indignation, 'when the legitimacy of Alison is at stake? Do you not perceive how extremely awkward it would be if the judge, when we come to ask for letters of administration, were to ask a few simple questions?'

'The judge is not likely to ask anything of the kind,' said Augustus.

'But he might,' Stephen persisted. 'He might say that although the deceased brought up this young lady as his daughter—a relationship proved, besides, by her great resemblance to him and other branches of the family—he left nothing behind him to prove that she is, in the eyes of the law, his daughter. What should we say then?'

'I think we can afford to wait till the difficulty arrives,' replied Augustus, quietly.

'Nay, there I differ from you. It is not often, cousin Augustus, that a man like myself can venture to differ from one of your business experience and clear common-sense; but in this case I do differ. None of us question Alison's legitimacy, but we would like to see it established. Let me, for Alison's own sake, clear this mystery. Besides,' he smiled winningly, 'I own that I am anxious to know something about this wife of Anthony's, kept so cunningly in the background.'

'For Alison's sake,' Augustus continued, 'I think you had better let it alone. You do not know what manner of unpleasantness you may rake up.'

'Why,' replied Stephen quickly, 'you would not surely insinuate that Alison——'

'I insinuate nothing. All I say is that Anthony had, probably, very good reasons of his own for saying nothing of his marriage. He probably married beneath him; he may have wished to keep his daughter from her mother's relations; the marriage may have been unhappy; the memory of his wife's death may have weighed upon him. There are many possible

reasons. Let us respect your brother's memory by inquiring no further into them.'

'If that were all,' Stephen sighed, 'I should agree with you. I wish I could agree with you: but, in the interests of Alison, I fear I must pursue my researches. Why, what harm if we do unearth a nest of vulgar relations? We can always keep them away from Alison. I will let you know the result of my researches, Augustus. And now good-bye.'

Augustus waited till the steps of this good guardian were heard at the foot of the stairs. Then he sought William the silent, and repeated the conversation.

William shook his head.

'Do you see the cloven foot, William? What a mistake we made in letting the man into the house! Why did we leave him the diaries? Why did we let it be possible to raise the question? After all these years, we should have known our cousin better. What can we do?'

'Wait,' said William.

'Do you know who would be the heir if——'

'I know,' said William.

In Alison's own interests. That was the way to look at this question. Stephen felt that he had now completely cleared the ground for action. Everybody was awakened to the fact that Anthony's marriage was still an unsolved mystery. Everybody would very shortly learn that Stephen the benevolent, in his ward's interest, was at work upon the problem. No one but the partners and the family lawyer would be likely to guess what issues might spring of these researches.

He began by questioning Mrs. Cridland. He invited her into the study one morning, placed her in a chair, frightened her by saying that he had some questions of the greatest importance to ask her, and then, standing over her, pocket-book in hand, with knitted brows and judicial forefinger, he began his queries.

Mrs. Cridland knew nothing. Anthony, when he brought Alison home, wanted a lady to take charge of her. Mrs. Duncombe, he explained, her previous guardian, was trustworthy, and thoughtful as regards the little girl's material welfare, but she lacked refinement. What was very well for a child of three or four, would no longer be sufficient for a great school-girl. So Anthony looked round, and chose—a cousin. Mrs. Cridland was a Hamblin by birth; her husband was dead; she had no money, and was at the moment actually living on an allowance made her by the most generous of cousins. She was delighted to accept the post of governess, duenna, and companion to this girl, with a home for herself and her white-haired boy, and a reasonable salary.

'Ah!' said Stephen at this point. 'Yes, a reasonable salary. What, may I ask, Flora, did my brother consider reasonable? He was not always himself a reasonable lender.'

This was unkind of Stephen.

'We agreed,' replied Mrs. Cridland, with a little flutter of anxiety, 'that the honorarium should be fixed at three hundred pounds a year.'

'Three hundred a year!' Stephen lifted his eyes, and whistled. '*And* board and lodging, of course. My poor brother was very, very easily cajoled. Even washing, too, I dare say.'

'If you mean that I cajoled him,' cried the lady, in great wrath, 'you are quite wrong! It was he who offered the sum. Cajoled, indeed!'

'Three hundred a year for ten years means, I should say, three thousand put by. You must have made a nice little pile by now, Flora. However—to return. Then Anthony told you nothing about the girl's mother?'

'Yes; he told me that she was long dead, and that he wished no questions to be asked at all.'

'And did you allude then, or at any other time, to the surprise felt by all his friends at such a discovery?'

'Of course at the time I told him how amazed we were to learn that he whom we regarded as a confirmed bachelor should actually turn out to be a widower. He said, with a laugh, that people very often were mistaken, and that now, at any rate, they would understand why he had not married.'

'He used those words? He said, "People will understand now why I have not married?" Take care, Flora; your words may be very important.'

'Good gracious, Stephen, don't frighten me! Of course he used those words. I remember them perfectly, though it is ten years ago.'

Stephen made a careful note of the words, repeating under his breath, 'why he had not married.' Then he looked as if he were grappling with a great problem.

'Thank you, Flora,' he said at length, coldly. 'I believe you have done your best to confess the whole truth in this extremely difficult matter.'

'What difficult matter? and what do you mean by "confessing"?'

'Is it possible, Flora, for a sensible woman like yourself to be blind to the probability that Anthony was never married at all?'

'Stephen,' she cried in sudden indignation, 'it is impossible!'

'It is difficult, Flora, not impossible; I am endeavouring to prove that Anthony *was* married. But as yet I have failed.

When did he marry? Where did he marry? Whom did he marry? Find out that if you can, Flora.'

'But then—there is no will either—and Alison would not be the heiress even.'

'Not of a single penny.'

'And who would have all this money?'

'I myself, Flora; now you see why I am trying to prove the marriage. It is in Alison's interests, not my own, that I take all this trouble.'

'You, Stephen, you?' All her instinctive dislike was roused. She stared at him in horror and astonishment. 'You? Then God help us all.'

'Thank you, Flora,' he returned coldly, playing with a paper-knife: 'that was kindly and thoughtfully said. I shall remember that.'

'Remember it on my account as much as you please, only do not visit my words on that poor child.'

'I do not intend to do so. Had it not been for the resolute way in which all my cousins have continued to misunderstand me, I might have expected some small credit for the pains I have taken for these months in clearing up this mystery.'

'Oh!' she cried, firing up, like the honest little woman that she was. 'I understand it all now—why you came here, why you tried to coax and flatter the poor girl, why you sat all day searching in papers—you wanted to test your own abominable suspicions—you wanted to persuade yourself that there are no proofs of Anthony's marriage—you wanted to rob your niece and get your brother's fortune into your own hands. And again I say, God help us all! But there are your cousins, and there is Mr. Billiter, to stand by her.'

'Thank you, Flora. To such a speech there is but one reply: I give you a day's notice to go. You shall be paid your salary up to date, and you shall leave the house at once.'

Here a sudden difficulty occurred. His account at the bank was reduced to a few shillings—how was he to pay this salary?

'I refuse to accept this notice. I will not go, unless I am told to go by Mr. Billiter, or by Mr. Augustus Hamblin. You are a bad and a dangerous man, Stephen Hamblin. We have done right to suspect you. Oh! my poor Alison!'

'Very well, madam, very well indeed. We shall see. Now go away, and tell Alison I want to say a few words to her.'

He looked blacker and more dangerous than she had ever seen him, and he held the paper-knife as if it had been a dagger.

'Stephen, you are not going to tell Alison what you suspect? You are not going to be so cruel as that?'

'I have a good mind to tell her, if it were only to punish

you for your confounded impudence. But you always were a chattering magpie. Anthony was quite right when he used to say that for downright idiotic gabble, Flora Cridland's conversation was the best specimen he knew. Go, and send Alison to me.

Anthony had never said anything of the sort. But it was the way of this genial and warm-hearted person to set people against each other by the simple process of repeating what had *not* been said.

Mrs. Cridland knew in her heart that Anthony could not have said words so unkind, but the thing pained and wounded her all the same, and she retired with trembling hands and lips. She had reason to tremble at the prospect. To begin with, she had lost, or would probably lose, her comfortable post and salary; she would have to fall back upon her little savings, and live in poverty and pinching; and then there was Alison and the terrible calamity which seemed hanging over her.

It was not Stephen's present intention to tell Alison of his suspicions. As yet he would only alarm her and make her anxious.

He received her with the same grave and judicial solemnity which he had observed towards Mrs. Cridland. He was seated now, and had before him a bundle of papers which he looked at from time to time as he spoke. Alison remained standing.

'Pray excuse me, Alison,' he began. 'In my capacity as administrator of these estates I have to trouble you from time to time with matters of business. Tell me, please—I asked you this once before—all you know about your—your mother.'

'I know nothing.'

'At least her name.'

He began to make notes of her answers. This irritated Alison.

'Not even her name. Papa once told me—it was the only occasion on which he seemed to speak harshly—that I was never to ask him any questions about her.'

He took this down in writing.

'But—the lady with whom you lived before you came here—Mrs. Duncombe. Did she never speak to you about your mother?'

'She knew nothing about her. I was brought to her a year-old child by papa. That is all she knew.'

'And the trinkets—nothing to connect you with your mother?'

'Nothing except a little coral necklace, which was found in a box of baby-clothes which came with me.'

'A coral necklace is nothing,' said Stephen, making a careful note of it. 'And that was all?'

'That was all, indeed. Why do you ask? Is there anything depending on my mother's name?'

'There may be, Alison. A great deal may depend upon it. Be assured that I shall do my best to find out the truth. Of course I mean in your interests.'

Alison retired, confused and anxious. In the breakfast-room she found Mrs. Cridland in tears.

'Oh! what has he said to you, Alison?' she cried, clasping her hands together. 'What has the horrid, wicked man been saying?'

'Uncle Stephen?' asked Alison in surprise. 'Why is he horrid and wicked auntie? He has said nothing. He only asked me for the second time what I knew of my poor dear mother, whom I never saw. To be sure, he wrote down my replies. But then, as I know nothing about her, there was not much to be said. And he had an odd way with him too. What is the matter?'

Mrs. Cridland breathed more freely on Alison's account. Here was at any rate a respite for her. She did not know, as yet, the miserable thing that was waiting for her, to be revealed at the man's good pleasure. So she replied with reference to her own troubles.

'My dear,' she said, wiping her eyes, 'we are to leave the house, Nicolas and I. Stephen has ordered us to go. We are to leave as soon as the money which is due to me has been paid. He says I must have cajoled your poor father——'

'But what does he mean? What excuse has he?'

'None that I know, except that I said a thing which angered him. And then there is the expense of keeping Nicolas and me. To be sure, the poor boy *has* got a large appetite.'

'Wait,' said Alison, 'I will know the reason of this.' She had no notion of a guardian's duties extending to the dismissal of her friends and companions.

'Oh, Alison!' Mrs. Cridland sprang forward and caught her by the arm. 'Don't go near him. He is dangerous. You will only make matters worse.'

Alison tore herself away.

'Alison, dear Alison, do not, for heaven's sake, do not anger him!'

But Alison was already in the study.

'Uncle Stephen,' she cried, with an angry spot on either cheek, 'will you be kind enough to tell me why you have ordered Aunt Flora out of the house?'

Stephen was already far advanced in one of his most brilliant and uncontrollable attacks of evil temper.

'I shall certainly not tell you, Alison,' he replied curtly.

'Not tell me? But you *shall* tell me!'

Stephen remarked, while he felt that he was about to mea-

sure swords with an antagonist worthy of himself, that Alison had never before so strongly reminded him of his mother, especially at those moments while the Señora allowed herself to be overcome with wrath. These moments, thanks to her son, were neither few nor far between.

'I *shall* tell you, shall I?' he replied. 'You order me to tell you, do you? Come, this is rather good. Be assured, young lady, that I have my reasons that Flora Cridland and her little devil of a boy shall turn out of this, without any delay, and that, as to my reasons, they are my own business.'

'No,' replied Alison, 'they are my business. You are my guardian, I know. But in a twelvemonth you will be guardian no longer. Let us understand one another, Uncle Stephen. You have certain powers for a limited time. Remember, however, that it is but a very limited time.'

'Oh!' said Stephen, looking dark and angry; 'you are going to lecture me on my duties as a guardian, are you?'

'No, I am not. But I am ready to tell you that if Aunt Flora leaves this house I shall go with her. I do not understand your duties to extend to depriving me of my companion and protector.'

'She is an heiress, this girl,' said Stephen. He had left the chair and his papers, and was standing upon the hearth-rug in one of his old familiar rages; one of those with which he would confront his mother in the old times. His bald temples were flushed, and his black eyes glittered. 'She thinks she is an heiress. She is a *grande dame*. Very good. She tries to hector ME. Very good indeed. She shall learn a lesson. Listen, Alison. You may threaten anything you like. At one word from me, at one single word, all this wealth of yours vanishes. Learn, that if I choose, say, when I choose, you will step out of this house a penniless beggar.'

'What do you mean?'

'Remember every one of my words. They mean exactly what they say. You depend at this moment on my forbearance. And, by Heaven! that has come very nearly to the end of the rope.'

'You think that I am in your power. Is that it?'

'That is exactly what I think.'

'Then, Uncle Stephen'—Alison stepped up to him and looked him full in the face. Like her uncle, she was flushed with excitement and indignant surprise, but her eyes expanded while his contracted under their emotions—'do not think that by anything you can say, or by any facts of which I know nothing, that I *can* be brought into your power. I used to wonder how two brothers could be so unlike each other as you and my dear father. Henceforth I shall be more and more thankful for the

want of resemblance. Meantime you will find that I shall not want protectors.'

She left him, and shut the door.

'Have I been precipitate?' Stephen thought, when he had had time to calm down; 'perhaps a little. Yet, after all, what matters? Sooner or later, the blow must have fallen.'

He rang the bell again.

'Give my compliments to Miss Hamblin,' he said; 'ask her if she will favour me with one minute more.'

Alison returned. 'You are going to explain what you said?'

'I am,' he said; 'if your abominable temper will allow you to be calm for five minutes. Listen. Since your father's death, I have been diligently hunting in your interests for any record of his marriage. *There is none.* Do you understand what that means?'

'No.'

'If no proof can be found, Anthony had no children——'

'No children? But I am his daughter.'

'He said so. Prove your—your descent, by proving your father's marriage. The law does not recognise likeness as proof of descent.'

Still Alison did not comprehend.

'You will find out what all this means in the course of time. For the moment, the only things you need understand are that your father was never married: he never had a wife; he therefore never had a child, in the eyes of the law. He made no will; you cannot, therefore, inherit one penny. The sole heir to all his property—this house, and all that is in it'—he swept round his arm with an air of comprehensive proprietorship—'is myself.'

'You.'

'Myself. No other. In your interests I have been doing what I could to find proof of the marriage. There are none. Everybody has always suspected this. I have always known it. In your interests and out of consideration to your own feelings, I have been silent all this time.'

'In my interests!' she repeated.

She had indeed the spirit of his mother, her quick perceptions and her fearlessness. With all his assumed exterior calm, Stephen felt that the girl was stronger than himself, as she faced him this time with every outward sign of outraged honour, flashing eyes, flushed cheeks, and panting breast.

'In my interests!' There were scorn and passion in her tones, beyond the power of an Englishwoman.

Mrs. Cridland, who had stolen timidly after the girl, fearful that this impious slanderer of his dead mother might insult her, stood within the door, trembling, yet admiring. Behind her, the

pink-faced boy with the heavy white eyebrows, who had just come home from school, gazed with curiosity, wonder, and delight. Uncle Stephen was catching it. This was better than pie. Alison—she really was a splendid fellow, he said to himself—was letting him have it. 'No one, after all,' thought young Nick, 'when it comes to real slanging, can pitch in like a girl in a wax.'

'In *my* interests!' she pointed her finger at his scowling face and downcast eyes. 'He pretends that my father was a deceiver of women; he pretends that my father threw away his honour, and my mother her virtue: he pretends that I am a cheat and an impostor: he pretends that everybody has always suspected it: he pretends that I have no right to the very name I bear. This man alone, of all the world, has been base enough to *think* such a thing of my father, he alone has dared to say it. In my interests he searches private papers for a secret which would not be there, and rejoices not to find it. In my interests he seeks to prove that he is himself my father's heir.'

She paused a moment.

'Alison!' whispered Mrs. Cridland, 'it is enough. Do not drive him to desperation.'

'He shall be no guardian of mine,' the girl went on. 'Henceforth, he shall be no uncle of mine. Oh! father—father—' she burst into sobs and crying, 'my poor dead father! Is there no one to call this man a liar, and give you back your honour?'

Stephen answered never a word.

Mrs. Cridland drew the girl passively away.

But young Nick rushed to the front. His eyes were lit with the light of enthusiastic partisanship. His white eyebrows stood out like the fur of a cat in a rage. He brandished his youthful fists in Stephen's face.

'I will, Alison,' he cried. 'You hear—you. You are a liar and a coward.' Here he dodged behind a chair. 'Wait till I get older, Uncle Stephen. You've caught it to-day from Alison, and you'll remember it. But that's pancakes—mind—to what you are going to catch when I grow up. Only you wait. Pancakes, it is, and parliament, and baked potatoes.'

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW STEPHEN ASKED FOR BARE JUSTICE, AND DID NOT GET IT.

THE die was cast, then. Stephen had committed all his fortunes to one hazard, the chance of his being right.

The great, quiet house—his own, he said to himself—became almost intolerable to him. The face of the indignant girl, so like, so reproachfully like his mother, haunted him, and remained with him. Above the mantelshelf, the Señora gazed down upon him with sorrowful eyes of deep black, like Alison's, which followed him wherever he moved. The girl's very gestures recalled to his mind his mother, her Spanish blood, and her Spanish ways. It was not pleasant, again, to feel that, somewhere, the two ladies were conversing together, indignant and humiliated, in wrath, shame and misery: it was not an agreeable reflection that not only then, but ever afterwards, he would be regarded as the author of all the sorrow. One may be an impenitent spendthrift: one may be the black sheep of the family: but one never likes to be thought the cause and origin of trouble, and this Stephen had brought upon his own back. Besides, he would have been the blackest of villains, indeed, had he been able altogether to forget Anthony, the generous brother who had maintained him in luxury for so many years, and whom he was going to repay in this—this very disagreeable way, so very disagreeably put by Anthony's daughter. People do not so much mind the sin of ingratitude, as being reminded of it.

Stephen took no notice whatever of the boy's impertinence: that was nothing: he hardly heard it; for the moment he was wholly overpowered by a sense of his own audacity. His mother, from her picture: his brother, from every corner of the room, from every trifle about it, from every book, from every chair—for all was full of his memory: his brother's daughter, with her gestures of surprise, contempt, and loathing; his cousin, timid and gentle enough as a rule, with her tearful face of sorrow and disgust—these, separately and together, reminded Stephen that he had staked his all upon one event, and prepared him for opposition and indignation.

He tried to shake off the impression produced by this contempt and wrath. It was useless. An hour before, he had been a strong man, walking with the firm tread of strength. Now, he felt small and weak: he walked, or thought he walked, with bent knees: he seemed to tremble as he stood; and when he looked at his mother's portrait, her eyes, which to him had always been so full of pity and of love, were turned, like those of Alison, into loathing. One never, you see, estimates quite justly, beforehand, the consequences of one's actions.

But he had done it. It was too late to go back.

No future words of his could ever destroy those which had passed between himself and his niece. They could never be recalled. There could be, he said, no reconciliation for himself and Alison: there could be nothing between them for the future but a duel *a outrance*. On her side would be his cousins;

all the family. On his own, the mystery—the impenetrable mystery—of her birth.

The battle was inevitable : the victory, he tried to persuade himself, was certain. Yet he hesitated. He wished he had been more gentle : he wished he had kept his temper : he wished he had weighed his words. One thing he could do: he would leave the house. There was no necessity for him to continue under the same roof with his brother's daughter : he could hardly turn her out: he would leave it himself, at all events for a time, until the first shock of the row should wear off a little.

His nerves were shaken, and he was glad to find an excuse for getting out of the place. The issue was so important, the stake so great, the associations of the house so strong, that he wanted the solitude of his own chambers. He told the footman that he should not be back for a day or two, and left the house. In reality, he ran away from Alison, whom he feared to meet again.

Alison, for her part, outraged and stricken down by this cruel and wholly unexpected blow, took refuge in her own room, trying to understand it, if she might. She was too wretched for tears. She threw herself upon the bed and buried her face in her hands, moaning with agony and shame. Everything was torn away at once : the dream of a fond and worthy mother, the belief in a noble and honourable father.

Had Anthony Hamblin foreseen this sorrow ? Had there been no middle way possible, by which the girl could have been spared at once the shame of her father's sin, and the agony of her mother's dishonour ?

' Grief,' said young Nick, when the clock pointed to half-past one, which was dinner-time, ' grief, *with* waxiness, makes a man hungry. Call down Alison, mother. Dinner will be on the table in a minute or two. As for the first cousin once removed, he's gone. I saw him out of the house myself ten minutes ago.'

Mrs. Cridland went to call her niece. She returned after a few minutes, her eyes heavy with tears. Alison would not come down at all.

Young Nick shook his head sagaciously.

' Girls,' he said, ' are good at a slanging match. Their tongues hang free, and their cackle is continuous. Men are nowhere. Still, men don't shirk their grub because they've had a fight. None such fools. It's only girls who don't see when it comes to keeping up the pecker, that the pecker must be kept up by more than the usual amount of grub, and break down. One short burst, good enough while it lasts, is the most they can manage. Then it is all over.'

When dinner was served, he took Alison's place at the head of the table and assumed the carving-knife and fork with con-

siderable increase of glory. Whatever might happen, he had covered himself with glory as the defier of villainy. Besides, it is not every day that a boy of fourteen is trusted to carve.

'Boiled rabbit, mother'—he brandished the carving-knife with ostentatious dexterity—'boiled rabbit, smothered in onions, and a little piece of pickled pig. Ah! and a very fair notion of a simple dinner, too; what we may call a reasonable tuck-in for a hungry man: not a blow-out, like the Hamblin Dinner; but a dinner that a man can do justice to, particularly if there's no falling off when the pudding comes. Let me give you a slice off the back. I say, mother'—there was a twinkle in his eye as he stuck the carving-knife into the vertebræ—'I say, I wish the bunny's back was Uncle Stephen's, and my knife was in it? Wouldn't I twist it! And suppose we had him before us actually smothered in onions!'

He took a more than ample meal, because, as he explained, he had now hurled defiance at his uncle, and a gentleman's glove once thrown down had to be fought for; therefore he must hasten to grow and get strong. With which object he must eat much more meat than was heretofore thought prudent, and a great deal more pudding. He begged his mother to remember that for the future.

'Fig pudding, old lady!' he cried, presently, with beaming eyes, having the dish set well before him. 'Figs made into pudding are recommended by doctors. They are said to be comforting after trouble.' He cut a slice for his mother, and then placed a very large one on his own plate. 'This,' he said, with a sigh, 'is for Alison, poor girl! She can't eat any. This,' he added another massive lump, 'is for myself. I will do the best I can and eat up her slice for her. She must not be allowed to lower the system.' His white eye-brows glittered like a diamond-spray as he rapturously contemplated the double ration.

As for Stephen, he was driving to town in a cab.

As he had been so hasty, as the thing had been told, as the cousins would most certainly hear of it immediately, it was far better, he thought, to go to them himself and tell the story first. At present, too, he had accepted the post of guardian, and thereby put himself in a false position. He ought not to have taken it; he ought to have asserted his claim from the beginning, in a modest, but firm, way; he should have communicated his suspicions. But then Stephen could never run straight. Meantime he must go and tell his story, whatever the result.

The result? Outside the house he began to shake off some of the whipped-hound feeling which oppressed him beneath the triple influence of which I have spoken. The result? What result could there be? His brother had never married. Why

justice was on his side; he asked for nothing but plain and simple justice: let bare justice be done to every man alike. What could his cousins, what could the world, object to in his claim for simple justice?

Yet there was once a man, a younger son, who laid a claim to a great title and great estate, held by his elder brother, on much the same grounds as he was about to advance. And though he had justice on his side, though it was clearly proved that he was the heir, the world condemned that man for raking up old scandals, for dishonouring the name of his mother, and the credit of his father. Stephen thought of that case, but he hardened his heart. Besides, he said it was done now; he had spoken the fatal words, he must go on. To tell Alison, for instance, that he intended to let her hold the estates by his gracious favour would never console her for the trouble he had brought upon her, would never heal the wound he had inflicted, would never lead her to forgive him who had cast a blot upon the fair name of her father. And again, it was absurd to suppose that he was going to let her hold the estates when they were his own.

If no man suddenly becomes the basest of men, it is also true that no man, brought up as Stephen Hamblin was brought up, can at any time, after however long a course of selfish pampering to his own appetites, contemplate an action of the basest kind without some sort of hesitation. No one would deny that this man was one eminently untrustworthy. Most of those who knew him best trusted him least. There was, in the opinion of his cousins, no wickedness of which he was not capable. They would not, for instance, have believed that this deed, perpetrated with such apparent calm deliberation, could have cost him so much hesitation and self-abasement. When we plan out a line of action for a knave, we are generally right, but we forget how much battling with his knavish conscience it costs him.

In truth, Stephen, by much brooding over the thing, had got to the level of hallucinations, a very common level with all sorts of people whom the world condemns.

He thought people would sympathise with him. In imagination, he took up the attitude of one who calmly, firmly, and without heat of passion, claims his own, standing out for the simple, the barest justice.

Alison showed him, with her swift contempt, how the world would really regard his action, what he would really seem. With her spear of Ithuriel she changed him from the upright figure of a wronged and injured man to a crawling, sneaking spy, who had crept into the house under false pretences, and made use of his opportunities to pry into the secrets of his

brother, discover the weak points and nakedness of the land, and, in his own interests, search into all the secret documents.

This view of the matter was not so pleasant to contemplate, and Stephen put it behind him as much as possible.

He deposited his bag in his chambers at Pall Mall, took a late lunch, with a single pint of champagne, at his club, and then drove into the City. Since the thing had to be done, let it be done quickly.

He presented himself at his cousin's private office, with an air which struck Augustus Hamblin as of ill omen. His dark eyes were bloodshot and more shifty than usual. They were ringed with black, the result of midnight potations, not of villainy, and they seemed more crow's footed than usual: his dress, which was that of a young man of five-and-twenty, seemed more than usually incongruous; he held between his lips the remaining half of a great cigar—men of Stephen Hamblin's stamp are seldom without a cigar between their lips—and smoking, especially in the day time, was always an abomination to Augustus Hamblin. Lastly, Stephen's cousin noticed that his cheek was twitching—a sign of nervousness—and that his hands shook, which might be the effect of villainous intention, or of late hours, or it might be drink. It must be understood that Augustus put none of these observations into words. They remained inarticulated thoughts.

'You here, Stephen?' he asked, not very cordially. 'Is anything wrong with your ward?'

'Nothing is wrong with my ward,' replied Stephen. 'It is not about her, or at least only indirectly, that I have come to see you.'

'Is it on business? Then we will ask my partner to be present. Two heads are better than one, or three better than two.'

He whistled down a tube, and sent his message.

Augustus Hamblin spoke cheerfully, but he remembered what Alderney Codd had told him, and he felt uneasy. William the Silent presently came, and nodded to Stephen. But he, too, looked meaningly towards his partner. The two sat like a judicial bench behind the table. Stephen, like a criminal, stood before them. He laid down the cigar, and looked from one to the other with a certain embarrassment.

'You will remember,' he said presently, producing a pocket-book full of papers, but this was only a pretence—'You will remember that when I was here last, Augustus, I asked you what you knew about my brother Anthony's marriage.'

'Certainly.'

'Since then I have been employing myself, in Alison's interests, in trying to clear up the mystery.'

'Yes, though you might as well have left it alone.'

'I might as well, so far as her interests go, as it seems,' said Stephen, clearing his throat. His face was pale now, but his attitude was firm and erect. He was about to fire the fatal shot. 'I might as well, because I have made——a remarkable discovery among Anthony's papers—a most surprising discovery; a thing which alters the whole complexion of affairs and puts me in a most awkward position.'

One of Stephen's least pleasant *traits* was a certain liability to inspiration of sudden falsehood, just as some men are apt to be inspired by sudden bursts of generosity and lofty purpose. It would have been better for him had he stated the truth, that he suspected no marriage, and found in the papers no proof of marriage. But it occurred to him at the moment that he would strengthen his case if he asserted that he had found proof of no marriage, a very different thing.

'What is your discovery?' asked Augustus, with a presentiment of something wrong.

'It is nothing less than the fact—you will be both more surprised than I was—nothing less—I am a man of the world and take these things as quite common occurrences—than the fact that my brother Anthony was never married at all.

'Stephen!' cried Augustus, 'can this be true?'

'Patience,' said William the Silent. 'Let him tell us the nature of the proof.'

'Oh! pardon me,' said Stephen. 'The nature of the proof I hold in my own hands. It is among these papers, and will be produced if necessary by my own lawyer, at the proper time and place. Anthony was never married.'

There was silence for a space.

'I leave to you,' said Stephen, 'if you like to undertake it, the task of proving that there was a marriage. I should advise you not to try. It will, I assure you, be labour lost.'

Again, neither spoke, and Stephen was obliged to go on.

'The consequences of this discovery,' he said, 'will be very serious. It makes me the Head of the House. Alison, my brother's daughter, is entitled to nothing. I shall, of course, take my brother's position as chief partner in this firm.'

'No!' said William, decidedly.

'Certainly not,' said Augustus. 'Whatever happens, you will never, I assure you, be a partner in this firm.'

Stephen nodded carelessly. 'We shall see. When it comes to taking me in or taking the consequences—however, I can afford to overlook a little natural surprise. Now, before I go before the Court of Probate, I am anxious to obtain your approval, your acknowledgment that my course is absolutely forced upon me. Remember, you invited me to be guardian: in

that capacity I went into residence at Clapham : in that capacity I made inquiries in Alison's interest : still in that capacity —still in her interest—I searched through the old papers and—I made this discovery. She has no legal right to more than the clothes she stands in. All the rest is mine. I am the sole heir. I ask you, as business men, what I am to do. I bring to you, as my cousins and hers, the first intelligence of the discovery.'

He did not wait for an answer, being, perhaps, afraid that they might either repeat that question as to the nature of the discovery, or counsel him to go and burn it.

'What would either of you do? It is, I know, absurd to ask. You would advise me at once to ask for bare justice. My just and legal claim is for the whole estate. This is my inheritance. When that claim is granted, I am prepared to consider the claim of my brother's daughter. What do you say?'

He looked from one to the other, but received no answer for the moment.

Then Augustus, in his dry and solemn way, asked :

'Pray, how much does Alison know of this—this alleged discovery?'

Stephen tried to look unembarrassed, but failed.

'She knows all,' he replied. 'My hand was forced, by some attempted interference with me. I told her the exact truth ; I disclosed her true position.'

'Poor girl!' said Augustus.

'However,' said Stephen, 'pity will not alter facts. I wait for an expression of your opinion.'

Augustus looked at his partner. William the Silent nodded his head suggestively, in the direction of the door.

'We refer you,' said Augustus, 'to Mr. Billiter. You may go and see him. Tell him, if you please, what you have told us. Our offer made a few weeks ago is, of course, withdrawn. You can no longer act as Alison's guardian. Henceforth, it will be better for you to communicate with us, who will assume the position of the young lady's protectors, through your solicitors. We express no opinion on what you have done : we do not venture to give you any advice. Good-morning.'

The cold contemptuous tone of his cousins was almost as intolerable as the indignation of Alison. Stephen left the office without a word.

When he was gone, the partners looked at each other and shook their heads.

'He may be lying,' said Augustus. 'He may be speaking the truth. What do you think?'

'Lies!' said William, whose opinion of Stephen was extremely low : 'lies somewhere!'

'Perhaps in either case we lose nothing by waiting. Could we have thought Anthony capable of such deception?'

'Lies!' said William again, stoutly.

Augustus Hamblin, himself a man of the strictest principle, had known his cousin Anthony from boyhood: had worked beside him: knew, as he thought, every action of his life. Yet he seemed ready, on the bare unsupported statement of Stephen, to believe that a man whose youth and manhood, open to all alike, were honourable and honoured, was a profligate, a deceiver of women, a secret libertine. There is no man so good but that the worst shall be believed of him. The Just man of Athens would never have been exiled had his countrymen been able to rake up a scandal against him. For my own part, when I consider the position, I am amazed that Aristides did not himself grow weary of provoking his countrymen by the exhibition of a virtue to which nothing short of the nineteenth century can show a parallel, and openly go and break half a dozen at least of the commandments, and so regain a hold upon the affections of sympathetic humanity.

William Hamblin would doubtless have been equally ready to believe this thing, but for his suspicion and distrust of Stephen.

The latter, only half satisfied with his reception by the cousins, drove straight away to the family lawyer. He would have it out at once—state his case, throw down the glove, and defy them to do their worst.

Mr. Billiter thought he was come to sign the agreement, according to their proposal, by which he was to undertake the name of guardian, receive an honorarium, and leave the conduct of affairs entirely in the hands of the partners. But Stephen pushed it aside.

'You may tear that thing up,' he said rudely. 'The time has gone by when that sort of thing could be signed. I have come to tell you that I have made a discovery—whether you knew it all along or not I do not know; perhaps you did; very likely you did—a discovery of so important a nature that it entirely alters the position both of myself and of Alison.'

'Indeed!' The old lawyer's tone changed, and his sharp, bright eyes glittered as he raised them to look at Stephen. 'Indeed! What is this discovery? Have you got it in your pocket?'

'It is nothing less than the fact that my brother Anthony was never married at all.'

This was indeed a facer.

'What do you think of that?' asked Stephen, triumphantly.

'I never allow myself to think of anything until the proofs are before me. Produce your proofs.'

'Not at all,' replied Stephen, tapping his breast, where lay

his pocket-book—'not at all. If there was a marriage, produce *your* proofs.'

The ferret-like eyes lit up with a sharpness which Stephen did not like.

'We assume the marriage,' said the lawyer. 'The presumption is in favour of the marriage. You have to disprove it. Where are your proofs?'

'As I said before,' Stephen answered, 'I reserve them. You will find that the law assumes that there was no marriage, and will call upon you for the proofs.'

'In that case, I give no opinion. This document, then'—he took up the agreement—'is so much waste paper.'

'It is. I refuse to sign it. I am going to claim the whole estate, as sole heir.'

'A bold game, Stephen. A desperately bold game. You give up the provision we offered you; you risk all in a single *coup*. Your proofs have need to be strong. You will want them as strong as they can be made.'

Stephen sat down upon the table familiarly—on the awful table, before which, as a boy, he had so often trembled.

'I begin to wonder,' he said, with as much rudeness as could be thrown into words and manner, 'whether you have been a dupe or an accomplice. Anthony had plenty of dupes. He must have wanted an accomplice.'

'Dear me!' said the lawyer, not in the least ruffled by this insult. 'Here is a turning of tables. So I am an accomplice, am I? Well?'

'You pretend not to know what I mean. And yet there are only you and myself in the room.'

'Perhaps it is not prudent to be without witnesses when you are here; but still, you see, I risk it.'

'I have been treated,' said Stephen, 'since my brother's death, with the greatest contumely by yourself and my cousins. You have offered me the post of guardian, coupled with degrading conditions. Yet I have held my hand, knowing what I knew. The time has come when I shall hold it no longer. I am now prepared to strike.'

'I clearly perceive, Stephen,' the lawyer observed, 'that you have been meditating all along a stroke worthy of your former reputation.'

'Your age protects you,' replied Stephen. 'You know that you can say whatever you please.'

'I have known you all your life, Stephen Hamblin, and I have never yet known you do a straightforward action. Now tell me, if you like, what you propose to do.'

'This, at all events, is straightforward. I am going to take out letters of administration, not for Alison, but for myself. I

shall put in an immediate claim on the estate, as the sole heir of my brother, who left no will, and was never married.'

He tried to look the old lawyer steadily in the face, but his eyes quailed.

'I see,' said the old man, 'this is your manœuvre, is it? Well, Stephen, we shall fight you. I don't believe a word of your discovery. It is bounce and suspicion, and a hope that because we do not know where Anthony was married, we cannot find out. Meantime, you must of course live on your own resources. You will have no help from us.'

'That,' said Stephen, 'I anticipated.'

'You will get nothing from the estate until the case is decided; and, of course, we shall only communicate with you through your solicitors. I have nothing more to say.'

He turned his chair round and took up some papers. Stephen lingered a moment. His face was dark and lowering.

'I hope that I have made myself sufficiently clear,' he said, stammering. 'I ask for nothing but justice. I am the heir. I assert that my brother never married.'

'You are quite clear,' said Mr. Billiter, without looking up; 'I am perfectly aware of what you mean.'

'I only claim my rights. Do you, a lawyer, dare to call that dishonourable?'

'Stephen Hamblin,' replied Mr. Billiter, laying down his papers and leaning back in his chair, and tapping his knuckles with his glasses, 'I said just now that I had never known you do one single good action. But you have done so many bad ones that I am never surprised at anything you do.'

'As for the bad actions, as you are pleased to call them—it is absurd, I suppose, to remind you of the exaggerations made——'

'Ta—ta—ta,' said the lawyer. 'We know. Your brother on whose generosity you lived being dead, you proceed to reward that generosity by proclaiming to the world the illegitimacy of his daughter, which you suspect, and hope to be true, but cannot prove. That is, indeed, the act of a high-toned, whole-souled gentleman.'

'It is in a lawyer's office,' said Stephen, as if with sorrow, 'I am upbraided in my intention of claiming what is justly due to me. So far, however, as Alison is concerned, your own injustice and the misrepresentations of my cousins will produce no effect. I shall provide for her: so far as a yearly hundred or two, I am willing——'

'Get out of my office, man!' cried the ferret-faced little lawyer, pointing to the door. 'You propose to rob your niece of a quarter of a million, and you offer her a hundred a year! Go, sir, and remember you have not got the money yet.'

Stephen had done it now. He felt rather cold as he walked away from Bedford Row. It was like parting with power in reserve. As for the wrath of his cousins and the old lawyer, that troubled him, after the first unpleasantness, very little. One thing only seriously annoyed him. Why had he not drawn the proffered yearly allowance of five hundred pounds before announcing his intentions? It was awkward, because Anthony, his sole source of income, being dead, and his balance at the bank being reduced to less than fifty pounds, it might become a difficulty to provide the daily expenses. However, long before that difficulty presented itself, he should, he thought, have gained a decision of the Court in his favour.

He went to his club in the evening, and dined there with his friend Jack Baker, whom we have already met at the Birch-Tree Tavern.

Stephen was melancholy, and inattentive to the claret.

'You are hipped old man,' said Jack. 'What is the matter?'

'A discovery I made the other day has rather knocked me over,' said Stephen. 'A discovery that obliges me to take action, in a painful way, with my own people.'

'In your own interests?'

'Very much, if we look at it only from a money point of view.' Stephen said, with a sigh. 'It is connected with my brother's estate, in fact. The estate, you know, is worth, one way and the other, something like three hundred thousand pounds.'

'Ah! He left no will, did he?'

'None; and up to the present moment my niece, his daughter, has been supposed to be the sole heiress. Now, however, we have discovered that the sole heir is—— But it will all come out in the Courts, before very long. No need to talk about it. This is very fine Léoville; let us have another bottle.'

'And you are his only brother,' said Jack Baker, thoughtfully. 'Why——'

If Stephen had searched about all over London for the best method of spreading a report abroad, he could hardly have hit upon a better one than that of hinting to his friend Jack Baker that something was in prospect. Perhaps he knew this.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VALLEY OF TEARS.

THE pudding was finished and the tablecloth removed before Alison appeared. She was calm now, but there was a burning

spot in each cheek, and a glow in her dark eyes, from which an enemy would have augured ill.

She sat down and wrote two letters: one of them was to Gilbert, the other to Augustus Hamblin. To the latter she related, as exactly as she could, what had taken place. The former she simply invited to call and see her as soon as he conveniently could.

She sent Nicolas with this note to the Temple, and posted the former. The boy understood that the letter meant the beginning of war: and his enthusiasm in the cause was roused. He acquired, too, a considerable accession of self-importance, from considering the fact of his own share in the struggle.

He took the omnibus to Blackfriars very soberly, playing no pranks at all on the way, and turning neither to right nor to left until he found himself in Gilbert's chambers in Brick Court. The young barrister was engaged in some devilling, that ingenious method by which the briefless delude themselves into the belief that they are getting on. He looked up and nodded cheerfully.

'How is young Nick? What seeks he here?' he asked.

Nicolas shook his head and looked mighty grave.

'What has happened?'

'Villainies,' replied the boy, in a hollow voice; 'villainies, conspiracies, and a kick-up. Here's a note for you. Alison wants you to come at once. You are not to delay one moment, she says, not even to part your hair down the middle.'—The young man's middle parting was always remarkably clear and well-defined.—'"Tell him," she says, "if he wants any more spooning, he'd better step out and get down at once."'

'I must, at least, change my coat. Now, boy,' emerging from his bedroom, 'just tell me, in a few words, what has happened.'

'Uncle Stephen—no, I forgot, he is no longer to be an uncle—first-cousin-once-removed Stephen has been staying with us for a week or so, as you know. He's been mighty civil to Alison, I must own. But the artfulness! It was all to poke about among the papers. And then he has a row with my mother, and then with Alison, and then he tells her that she's no right to the fortune at all, and it's all his. Think of that! "Oh! yes," he says, "you think it's yours, do you? Much. I'm the owner, I am. As for you, you are nobody. You may go. Nicolas Cridland," he went on, "may go too. With the old lady."'

'Not the heiress? What does he mean?'

'Here comes in the villainy. Because, he says, Uncle Anthony was never married. That's the reason. Well: when Alison heard him say that—she's got a fine temper of her own, once

get her back up; you will discover it some day: so don't say I didn't warn you—she went at him with '—he looked round him in doubt—'with the tongs.'

'Nonsense.'

'I backed her up. When she'd quite finished I let the first-cousin-once-removed have a bit of the rough side of *my* tongue, too. I don't pretend to be a patch on Alison, because when a girl—a strong girl, mind you—gets her back up and her tongue well slung, she can let out in a way to make a man's hair stand on end. His hair stood up, all that's left of it. He hadn't a word to say.'

The boy stopped, waiting for applause. None came.

'I say, I suppose you envy me, don't you? Wish you had been in my place to cowhide him?'

'Why, you don't mean to say that you——'

'I *promised*, which is the same thing,' said Nicolas proudly. 'Let him wait till I am one-and-twenty. Then he shall feel how spry a curly one about the legs will make him. But, I say, you're a private and particular friend of Alison's. I don't mind taking you in. It's seven years to wait, you see, and then no telling what may happen. We'll stand in together, if you like.'

'Thank you,' said Gilbert; 'and where is he?'

'Oh, ran away! Didn't stop to reflect that he's got seven years to wait. Ran away at once. Alison wouldn't have any dinner, though there was—never mind. Came down when we'd finished, quite quiet, but looking dangerous—handy with her heels, you know—and wrote two letters. One was yours. I was rather glad to get out of the house myself. No telling whether she mightn't have rounded on me, as she's done once or twice before.'

The boy, in answer to Gilbert's questions, stuck to the substantial basis of his story, although he embellished it by features which changed with each narration. Alison was not the heiress, because her father was never married. And this statement had been made coarsely and even brutally.

Could it be true? And if so, what was Alison's position?

Gilbert lost no time in getting down to Clapham, leaving the boy behind to saunter through the streets and follow at his leisure.

He found Alison standing at the window of her own room, impatient and restless. She was transformed. The girl whom he had last seen, only a day or two before, soft, shrinking, gentle, stood before him with lips set firm, defiant pose, and eyes in which the glow of love and *douce pensée* had given place to a hard and cold light.

He took her hand and wanted to kiss her.

'No, Gilbert,' she said harshly. 'It was not to listen to love-stories that I sent for you. Perhaps, most likely, all that is over. You have heard—did the boy tell you?—what has happened?'

'He did tell me. Stephen Hamblin seeks to rob you of your inheritance.'

'And of my name, and of my father's honour, and of my mother's honour. He will try to rob me of all at once. There will be nothing left.' Her voice failed her, but it was not to sob or cry that she broke down. 'Tell me first, Gilbert, if you, too, were one of those who all along suspected this thing? My uncle says that everybody suspected it.'

'It is false, Alison. Nobody, so far as I know, ever suspected such a thing. I the least of all men.'

'But he *said*,' she repeated, 'he *said* that everybody always suspected.'

'It is false again, Alison—a thousand times false! Believe me, no one ever dreamed of suspecting such a thing.'

She seemed not to hear him.

'So that I have been living for ten years in a fool's paradise, while people scoffed at me behind my back, and at my mother, and said hard things about my father. What a life for us both! and we never knew it.'

'Alison! Do not believe, do not think such things.'

'But if such things are true—and, whether I think them or not, they may be true. And one thing seems true, that my poor father left no will, and, unless I can prove his marriage, which—he—says never took place, I am a beggar in fortune, as well as in honour. I have nothing.'

'Yes, Alison'—he took her hand in his, and held it in the firm man's grasp which brought her comfort for the moment—'yes, Alison, you have something left. You have me; you have love. You have plenty of others who love you, but not so well. We shall only have to wait a little longer. You will not be able to hear your husband called a fortune-hunter. That is what it means, if it is true—all it ever shall mean to you and to me.'

She shook her head, and the tears ran to her eyes. For some moments she could not speak. Then she conquered herself, drew back her hand, dashed the tears away, and became hard again.

'It means more, Gilbert. It means a great deal more. I am—illegitimate.'

She did not blush nor wince, but boldly pronounced the word, as if she would face the thing at once.

'I must be ashamed of my mother; I must be ashamed of my father; I must never, never think of marriage or of love. This must be my farewell to you, dear Gilbert.'

He seized her in his arms, and kissed her again and again, until she broke away from him.

'My darling! Do you think I should let you go? Why, what is it? You have lost your name; all the more reason for taking another. And as for—for your father, you must try not to think unkindly——'

'Not unkindly,' she said. 'Never unkindly, only sorrowfully, because I thought him blameless.'

Each time her lover ceased to touch her, she became hard and defiant again.

'Do not think of it at all in connection with him,' urged Gilbert. 'Let your thoughts dwell only on the happy past, which can never be forgotten. Think if he did you a great wrong, he did all he could to repair it.'

'Yes, yes,' she murmured impatiently. 'It is of—the other—that I think—the man who has done the mischief to me. Yesterday I knew nothing. Yesterday I was proud of my father, and of myself. I had everything that a girl wants, except him whom I had lost. I had a lover——'

'You have still, Alison. I will not be denied that title. I am your lover, whatever may happen.'

'You are kind, Gilbert,' she said; 'but you must not love me any longer. I will not think of love any more. I will not drag you down. I mean it. I am resolved in this. I will not marry. I will not endure to feel that your own people would have to apologise for me, that perhaps my own children would have to blush for their mother's birth. Spare me that, Gilbert, if you love me, as I think you do.

'The misfortune has fallen on both of us alike,' she went on, releasing herself a third time from Gilbert's hands. 'It has been sweet for me to feel that I was loved, especially since my father's death. It is dreadful to give you up, Gilbert. But I am resolved. When my uncle told me, this morning, my first thought was that I must give you up. Ever since then I have been thinking about it.'

She drew a ring from her finger—the ring of her engagement. 'Take it back, Gilbert. Our engagement is at an end. I give you back your vows with this ring. You shall marry no base-born girl.'

He refused to take the ring.

'I will take back neither vows nor ring, Alison. I am your lover. I swear that I will never be released unless you marry another man.'

'I shall marry no one,' she said. 'Go away, Gilbert. You must see me no more. I forbid you the house, my poor Gilbert, as long as I have a house at all. Soon I shall have no house.'

'Alison,' cried the young man, 'do not be cruel! I will *not* be sent away. Remember, I am always your lover.'

She shook her head. There was resolution in every line of her figure, as she stood before him. He saw that remonstrance, entreaties, and prayers were useless—for the moment.

'You must not try to see me any more, Gilbert. Remember that every time I see you will bring me fresh pain and misery. I will go away somewhere—I dare say my cousins will not let me starve—and hide myself and all this shame. I only sent to you, to tell you that it was all over. Poor boy!' Her hard eyes softened and became beautiful again, as she laid her hand upon his sleeve. 'You feel it now, but you will forget. You will go about in the world and do great work, and so learn to forget, and then you will find some other girl whom you will love as much as ever you loved me—and who will have a—a—story that can be told without shame.'

'Stay!' cried Gilbert, 'stay, Alison. We are going far too quickly. All is not over yet. Whose word have you beside your uncle's?'

'No one's. He *would* not dare to say such a thing unless it were true.'

'He says, Nicolas tells me, that he has proof that there was no marriage. We shall believe that story when we see the proofs.'

'There must be proofs.'

'Let us first learn what they are. Until we can examine the proofs for ourselves, I for one, Alison, shall disbelieve the statement. What would the proof be? Are we to believe that your father deliberately left a paper among his private documents, stating that he was never married? This seems ridiculous. What other proof has he, or can he have?

'I believe,' Gilbert continued, 'that the statement is a pure fabrication. See, Alison, Mr. Stephen Hamblin is, and always has been, a man of low principle. It is his interest to make out this charge. He knows that there is no will. He knows, further, that your father was unwilling, for some reason best known to himself, to talk about his married life; and so he calmly frames this gigantic LIE, in hope that it will be believed.'

Alison shook her head.

'Let us not be the first to believe it. Until it is proved—and it never can be proved—let us—if only you and I remain loyal—go on believing in the honour of your father. My dear, you *must* believe it.'

'You say so, Gilbert, to comfort me.'

'Perhaps, partly to comfort you; but I believe solemnly that it is the truth. Surely it is more easy to believe that your father was always what you knew him to be in every relation of life—a good man—than that he lived perpetually in an atmo-

sphere of deceit and treachery. Shake off that distrust, Alison. It is a nightmare born of the base insinuations and suggestions of that man. Hold up your head and face the world. Let us say simply: "Anthony Hamblin *could* not have done this thing." And even if the law allows him, which I do not think, to lay his unrighteous hand upon your fortune, go on in your belief and loyalty to your father.'

'They are brave words, Gilbert,' she said. 'You are a strong man: you can dare and do. I am only a weak woman. When things are said, the words are like daggers and pierce my heart. But you are right. I am fallen indeed if I can cease to believe in the goodness of my father.'

'And this ring, Alison?' He held up the engaged ring.

'No,' she said, 'I am resolved upon that. You and I, Gilbert, will believe in my father: you, because you are loyal to the memory of a man who loved you: and I, because it will be all my comfort. But I will not put on that ring again until it has been proved to all the world that I need not blush with shame when my mother's name is mentioned.'

Gilbert hesitated for a moment, thinking what to say, what comfort to bring.

'In that case,' he said at length, with a forced smile, "we must try to penetrate the mystery and find the truth about your father's marriage. At least you will let me work for you.'

'I shall be deeply grateful to you,' she replied, holding out her hand to him. The hard light in her eyes was gone, but the lip trembled still: 'I shall be grateful, even if you find nothing. But you must remember one thing, Gilbert—until you have found out—what we seek—there must be no word of love; and if we never find out, there must never be word of love between us. Do you promise not to break this rule?'

'It is a very hard promise, Alison. If you knew how I love you, you would not ask it of me.'

'It is because I do know, and because—oh, Gilbert!—because it is as hard for me to ask as for you to promise, and because, whatever happens, I must try to keep my self-respect. Promise me.'

He promised, at length, kissing her fingers.

'And now,' he said, 'I shall go to your cousins and offer my services to unravel the mystery. I shall do nothing else until we have learned the truth.'

'Oh, Gilbert!' She was going to have one devoted friend, at least. To be sure she had known that he would be her knight. 'But you must not ruin your practice at the Bar for my sake.'

The young member of the Inner Temple laughed sarcastically.

'My practice?' he asked. 'What does not exist cannot be very well ruined, my dear child. I have no practice. No doubt

I shall get some in course of time, if I go on. At present, solicitors do not know my name, and I am briefless. Do not be disturbed about my practice.'

Meantime Nicolas had found his way home and discovered his mother again in tears. This was disagreeable. It was still more disagreeable, when he inquired the cause, to learn that, if Alison lost her inheritance, his mother would lose that three hundred pounds a year which formed, as Nicolas for the first time learned, her sole income.

'I suppose we shall all three go to the workhouse,' the poor lady sobbed.

'No, mother,' said Nicolas. 'You and Alison may go there, if you like, and if you prefer skilly to chops. I shan't. Come, old lady'—he rammed his hands into his pockets, and stood with his legs apart—'come, cheer up. Workhouse, indeed! Haven't you got ME? For the present, I suppose, I must enlist. I can have stoppages made for you and Alison out of the pay. That will carry you on till I'm old enough—provided I am not in the meantime killed in action—to enter the Firm. The least they can do for me after cheeking Uncle Stephen—and, of course, I shall horsewhip him when the time comes—is to give me a desk. Then I can support you both in comfort, with boiled rabbit and onions and pickled pig every day. That fellow Yorke, unless I am greatly mistaken in the man, which isn't usual with me, will want to cry off when he hears that Alison has got no money. I don't much like that style of man: blue eyes, curly brown hair, regular features—barber's-block features, long legs, and broad shoulders. I hope she won't take it too much to heart. After all, it will be only waiting for me. I'm the sort of man to make her really happy. I feel it in me. Cheer up, old lady.'

He kissed his mother and patted her cheek. I think Mrs. Cridland was greatly comforted by the thought that her boy would be so great a stay and prop to her.

Then the boy heard Gilbert's step in the hall, and ran out.

'Done with Alison?' he asked. 'Come this way.' He led him into the study, where there stood a rack of choice canes, walking-sticks, and bamboos, brought to the Head of the House from foreign parts. It was a really valuable and beautiful collection, which Anthony had been accumulating for many years.

'This way.' He stood before the rack and examined the contents critically. 'I will find something that will just do for you, Yorke. See: don't take this Malacca, because it is too light for serious business: Malaccas are apt to break in the hand. Here's a Penang Lawyer, which I should like to lend you if I could trust your temper. But I can't, and you might kill your man. This Persuader is from Singapore, but they've loaded it

with lead, and we must stick to the legitimate thing. The Tickler at your left hand is from Shanghai: it has tickled many a Chinaman into an early grave. But we don't want to give him anything luxurious. This is a lovely thing from Mauritius, see: clouded and mounted; it's trustworthy, too, and heavy; but I'm not going to treat such a fellow as that to anything expensive. He'd boast of it afterwards. Common ware, sir, and tough, and apt to curl about the legs. That's all he shall get from me.'

Gilbert looked on in amazement. What did the boy mean?

'Now here'—he took down a thin and longish bamboo. 'This is the very thing. Common and cheap, effective, and tough. You can lay on with this without fear of its breaking. It's as springy, too, as india-rubber. That thing, sir, judiciously handled, will raise the most Enormous weals, and hurt like winkin'. Phew! Ey—oh!'

'What *do* you mean?'

'You've been spooning again,' said Nicolas, severely, 'and it's made you go silly. Didn't I promise you should stand in with me about the cowhiding? Very well, then. Take and go and do it.'

'Oh! nonsense. There's to be no cowhiding.'

'No cowhiding?' Young Nick almost shrieked with indignation. 'Why, I *promised* him. You're *not* going to do it?'

'Certainly not.'

The boy's face fell. This was bitter disappointment.

'Go away,' he said; 'I thought better of you. If I had a girl who'd been treated as Alison has been treated, I'd cowhide the man first and pepper and salt him next. You'll do as you please.' He replaced the stick with a sigh. 'Of course, all the real work, as usual, is laid upon my shoulders.'

CHAPTER XV.

HOW STEPHEN LEFT THE HOUSE.

STEPHEN slept at his chambers that night. But in the morning the strange feeling of nervous terror, under the influence of which he had left the house at Clapham, had disappeared with the impression produced by Alison's eyes and words. He began to consider whether it was prudent to retract from the stronghold of constructive possession.

It was matter of simple evidence that he went to the house on the very day of his brother's death: that might be with the

view of assuming the guardianship, which naturally devolved upon him, or that of asserting his own claim. He had lived there for three months, by tacit acknowledgment, he might say, the master. And yet, on the day when he distinctly laid his pretensions before the partners, he returned to his own chambers. Perhaps that would look something like distrust of his own claims.

This knotty point gave him uneasiness. He really did not wish to return: he was afraid of meeting his niece: he was afraid of those black eyes in the portrait which followed him round the room with reproachful gaze; but, on the other hand, he was bound to show a bold front. He had taken up a position from which there was no retreat. He had gone beyond the truth in asserting that he held written proof that there never had been any marriage at all; whereas all that he could really prove was that he had found no mention of any marriage. And there was always the terrible doubt in the background that, after all, there might have been a secret marriage, a marriage under an assumed name which further search might reveal. If it were discovered, he would be indeed ruined.

It was more than possible: it even seemed probable, now that it was too late, now that he had incurred the wrath of the other side and played his trump cards. Why was it that it seemed so impossible the day before?

Given a man of absolutely unblemished character, living a life open for all the world to see; given the fact of a child strongly resembling him, and even more strongly resembling his mother; add to these the open production and acknowledgment of the girl as his own daughter: these things made up a very strong case; so strong, that when Stephen put them together he felt cold, and began to wish that he had not been so precipitate.

It became, therefore, the more necessary to maintain the boldest bearing. He would go back to the house, install himself there, and let the servants know that he was master. As for Alison, it was her part, not his, to turn out.

The house, when he admitted himself with a latch-key, was perfectly silent. The two ladies were in the breakfast-room: Nicolas was at school: the servants were engaged in the light and leisurely occupations which they called work. They made no noise; if they talked it was in low tones, so as not to disturb the silence which, for three months, save for the voice and the steps of Nicolas, had been almost unbroken. He stepped hurriedly, as if afraid of meeting someone, into the study. The eyes of his mother's portrait met his as he closed the door, and again the odd feeling of cold, as if the dead were reproaching him, fell upon him. He threw down his bag: took a cigar

from the box nearest, lit it, and went out of this silence, which was sepulchral and oppressive, into the gardens.

The morning was delightful: the lilacs, almonds, peaches, white-thorn, and laburnum, for it was an early season—were all blossoming together: the air of the young spring was heavy with perfume: a blackbird was singing in the garden: all round him were the delicate leaves of spring, the young foliage, yellow rather than green: a broad horse-chestnut over the stables was showing on its branches the great sticky cone, oozing all over with gum, out of which would shortly spring blossom and leaf: the dark cedars of Lebanon showed black beyond it. At his feet were all the spring flowers that he remembered of old—the London-pride, the pale primrose, the wall-flower, the violet, the auricula, the polyanthus, the narcissus, and the jonquil.

The memory of those accusing eyes of the portrait followed Stephen into the garden: the lawns and flower-beds, the lilacs and laburnums, awakened unexpected associations.

'I have not seen the old garden,' he murmured, 'for twenty years. It is not changed at all. My mother might be on the lawn now, as she was one morning—just such a morning—thirty years ago and more, when I was a boy——'

As he spoke, Alison, coming from the vinery, crossed the lawn on her way to the house. She paused for a moment, and standing on the springy turf, not seeing her uncle, she looked round her and breathed the soft sigh of contentment which the early summer air pours into the heart of maidenhood. She had tied a handkerchief round her head. Her black eyes were full of softness, heavy with the sweet influences of the hour: her lips were parted: her head drooped a little, like a flower too happy in the sun; her figure, *svelte et gracieuse*, seemed soft and yielding, a very figure of Venus—how different from the wrathful eyes, the angry voice, the set lips, of yesterday!

Stephen dropped his cigar.

'My God!' he said, 'I thought it *was* my mother! How like her she is!'

He dropped into thought, standing where he was, gazing through the shrubs upon the vacant lawn, peopled again in imagination by just such a woman as Alison, only older, by a child of five or six, himself, and a tall, raw schoolboy, his brother.

'Anthony!' he murmured, with something like a choke in his throat. He saw again in his imagination the little boy running backwards and forwards, shouting, laughing, dancing, while the elder boy played for him and with him, and the lady with her black mantilla watched them both with soft and loving eyes.

Stephen's own eyes softened as he recalled the pretty scene, so old, so long gone by, himself the only survivor.

Now, to what length this softening process might have gone,

had it not been interrupted, I do not know. One can only speculate. It was, in point of fact, stopped, ruined, and hopelessly destroyed, all in a moment, and in the very bud and opening. For just then a stable-boy—this was on the way to the stables—who was engaged in polishing harness, became suddenly possessed by the devil. I think, indeed, that he was the devil himself. He laughed aloud, a strident, mocking laugh, which seemed to Stephen as if his one newly-conceived germ of —call it a tendency to a readiness to accept the softening influence of repentance, were the object of the stable-boy's derision.

Stephen's temper was arbitrary ; his own personal submission to that temper was abject. He stepped hastily into the stable-yard, and cursed that young assistant, who, to outward view, was as meek as Moses, till he trembled and shook in his shoes.

Then Stephen entered the stables themselves, and began to examine them. The profitable vision of the lawn had already faded from his mind. When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness, even in imagination, and for a few brief moments only, he does not like to be laughed at. He would rather relapse. Stephen relapsed. He remembered too that he was there to show himself as the master. He therefore cursed the groom a second time.

'Two fat coach-horses, and two riding-horses, and a pony,' said Stephen, standing at the door of the stable, while the groom trembled outside, 'and four lazy scoundrels to wait on them ! You, groom fellow, take a month's notice. Tell the coachman to take a month's notice. Tell the other men to take a month's notice. I am going to sell off all the horses. Do you hear ? And this coach, and the pony-carriage. A hansom cab is good enough for me. Such mad expenditure,' he added, 'would swamp the income of a Rothschild !'

The groom made no reply, resolving to lay the whole case immediately before the young lady. Miss Hamblin's riding-horse, Master Nicolas's pony, and all to be sold off ! And the coachman, grown old in the Hamblin service, to be dismissed ! And himself to take a month's notice, who hoped to remain, like the coachman, among the Hamblins all his life ! 'Why,' thought the boy, watching Stephen's receding figure, 'who's Mr. Stephen, to come and order people out of the house ?' But he was alarmed.

Stephen passed through the shrubs, and came into the garden itself. Alison was sitting at the window of her own room, called the breakfast-room, and saw her uncle. Instantly the day became cold to her, and the sunshine paled. She pulled down the blind, but the sight of him brought back the horror

of the day before, and her brief joy in the season of spring was destroyed.

The garden, both broad and long, had a great lawn, set with flower-beds, immediately behind the house. At the back of the lawn was a goodly show of glass, with vineries, conservatories, hot-houses, every kind of luxurious garden-house. And at the back of the glass-houses lay the kitchen-garden.

Most of the glass-houses were new to Stephen. He began to reckon up the expense of keeping them up, and resolved on one more economy. It is curious to observe how jealous the prodigal son has always shown himself over the reckless extravagance of his brother.

'Who are you?' he asked a man without a coat, who was pottering among some plants, set out to enjoy the morning sun. The man was tall and spare; he had red hair; his cheek-bones were high. They called him Andrew, and he never boasted any other name.

'Who are you?' he repeated, because the man only looked at him, and replied not. In fact, Andrew did not know Stephen by sight, and was just slowly beginning to make out that the stranger bore a resemblance to Miss Hamblin. 'Who are you, and what are you doing here?'

'I'm head gardener,' replied Andrew, with dignity, 'and that's what I'm doing.'

'Head gardener? Why, how many of you are there?'

'Three!' said Andrew. 'Myself, a man and a boy.'

'Three!' Stephen echoed. 'And four lazy devils for the stables. What a household! What reckless profusion!'

Andrew looked stolidly at him.

'I suppose'—Stephen addressed the chief of this watchful band of three—'I suppose you think that this extravagance will be allowed to continue?'

'It's accordin' to the young leddy,' said Andrew. 'You and me, we've just got to do what she says.'

'You and I?' cried Stephen. 'What the devil do you mean?'

'Dinna swere,' said Andrew. 'What I mean is that the young leddy is the maister since poor Mr. Hamblin got drouned. If ye don't like this extravagance, go and tell her, and leave me and my wark.'

'I tell you what,' cried Stephen, in a rage, and again obedient to that hard task-master—his temper; 'I'll soon show you who's master here. Go and put on your coat; you shall have a month's wages instead of notice.'

'Eh? eh?' said Andrew, no way disconcerted. 'I reckon I'll just wait till the young leddie tells me go.'

'You scoundrel!' cried Stephen, raising his stick, 'I'll break every bone in your insolent body.'

Andrew quietly allowed the spud in his hand to assume a horizontal position, so that it became at once a spear levelled at vital parts.

'Aweel,' he said, with a smile of resolution, 'if there's ony breaking of bones, there's always the spud.'

Stephen turned away. Hitherto, he had not gained much by assuming the air of the master.

He returned sulkily to the study, where he sat down, angry, ashamed, and unquiet, to examine and turn over for the tenth time those diaries of Anthony's life.

The day was not destined to be a propitious one for him. He had not been more than half an hour at his work, when he became aware of a most intolerable and exasperating noise.

Unfortunately, it was Wednesday.

Any misfortunes which might happen in that household on that day were always, from a rude instinctive recognition of the principles of cause and effect, associated with the fact that it was young Nick's half-holiday.

He was wont on Wednesdays to return home a little before one o'clock, with idle hands and a mind free from care, and therefore ready for the reception of temptation ; in fact, anxious to be tempted.

Let us do the boy justice. On this occasion he thought that Stephen had left the house, after the awful row, for good, and was not coming back any more. Otherwise he would have proceeded with more discretion. Thus, he would not certainly have whistled so loudly as he ran up the steps which led from the garden entrance into the hall ; nor would he, on arriving in the hall, have followed up the rich and creamy notes of his whistling —he always chose those airs which most madden and drive wild the adult hearer—by singing the same melody at the top of a voice which was not by nature musically soft, and was strident in the upper notes.

Had he known, too, that the great coat hanging in the hall belonged to his uncle Stephen, and not to the family doctor, who, he presumed, was at the moment in conversation with his mother, he would have hesitated before drawing from his pocket a small case containing needles and thread and sewing up the lining of the sleeves. This, however, he did, lightly, but with judgment, about six inches above the cuff, so that the arm on reaching the obstacle would have acquired a certain amount of momentum. Nicolas had not yet studied Dynamics, but he knew that the greater the force with which a human arm meets such an impediment in the sleeve, the greater is the shock to the system. Young Nick, therefore, executing his task with the sweet smile of anticipated delight, which he proposed to enjoy from ambush, sewed up the sleeves very low down.

This done, still in ignorance of his uncle's presence, he began to whistle again, and bethought him of a certain double-shuffle which he had seen at the Christmas pantomime, and had practised without success ever since. The noise caused by a double-shuffle on canvas is in itself far from soothing to the nerves. After the dance he proceeded to try a new figure in gymnastics, which also necessitated a good deal of inharmonious sound. He had just inverted himself, and was balancing on his two hands, trying to acquire complete control over his feet, when the door of the study opened, and Stephen came out. He had been goaded almost to madness by the stamping, dancing, and whistling combined. He had borne it for a quarter of an hour. When it became intolerable he rushed out. The boy, thinking it was one of the footmen, began at once to spar at him with his feet.

'You little devil!' roared Stephen, enraged at this last insult. 'Get up at once, and I'll break your neck for you.'

Young Nick sprang to his feet, and was instantly collared by the angry Stephen and dragged into the study. He realised in a moment the danger of the situation: he was hurried thither because there was the choice collection of canes to which he had himself only the day before introduced Gilbert Yorke. 'How swift,' observes the poet of Olney, 'is a glance of the mind!' In a moment the boy remembered every cane in the rack, and wondered whether he should be operated upon by Penang Lawyer, by Malacca cane, by Singapore Persuader, or by Chinese Tickler. For the moment he gave himself up for lost. Yesterday's defiance would also be reckoned in. A caning, grim and great, was imminent. It was, however, only for a moment that young Nick abandoned hope. Stephen dragged him across the room, making swiftly for the sticks. There was not an instant to be wasted in reflection. Suddenly Stephen found the boy's legs curled round and mixed up with his own. He staggered, let go the collar of his prisoner's jacket, and fell heavily, tripped up by the craft and subtlety of the artful youth. The next moment there was a mighty crash, as the heavy tablecloth, with all its books, inkstands, papers, cigar-cases, and heterogeneous litter which piled it, was dragged down upon him. When, after a few moments of struggle, he disengaged himself and stood upright among the *débris*, the boy was gone. What was worse, he had locked the door. Young Nick had escaped. It would have been a flying in the face of Providence had he not seized the happy chance and turned the key upon his enemy.

This done, the fugitive sat down upon the floor of the canvas, drumming his heels with delight and waiting the course of events. He had not long to wait. The next moment he

heard the scuffling of his victim as he freed himself from the table-cloth, the angry turning of the door-handle, the discovery that the door was locked, and the ringing of the bell. Upon this, young Nick sprang to his feet, and rushed to the stair-head. He met the footman leisurely mounting the stairs to answer it.

'You need not disturb yourself, Charles,' he said softly; 'go on with your dinner. I know what my uncle wants.'

Charles descended. Young Nick watched him till he had returned to the kitchen, and then, sliding noiselessly down the banister, mounted a chair and unshipped the study bell.

'Now he can ring as long as he likes,' said the boy.

After this, he composed his features and went upstairs to his mother, who was sitting sadly with Alison, both of them far too dejected to have noticed the small disturbance which had just taken place. Here he took a book and sat reading sweetly, in silent calculation as to the time during which his uncle would remain a prisoner.

Presently there was heard a noise as of one kicking or hammering against a door, with a roaring like unto that of an angry wild beast. The two ladies did not for some time notice this disturbance. Young Nick, who did, put up the book before his face to hide the unbidden smile of satisfaction. It was Uncle Stephen kicking at the study-door, and swearing at the top of his voice.

'Dear me!' cried Mrs. Cridland, at length, 'what can be the matter? Who can be making this terrible noise?'

'It may be the gardener,' said Nicolas, sweetly; 'I will go and see.'

It was time that he went, because the footmen, who had now finished their dinner, were becoming aware of something singular going on overhead, and in two minutes Stephen might have been free, and upon him with a cane in his hand. Now, in the open, in the garden, young Nick felt himself a match for any man, armed or not. He therefore retreated to the top of the stairs which led to the garden, there to await events.

At this moment a carriage drove up. Charles, the footman, arriving in the hall, alarmed by the kicking at the study-door, and the awful explosion of wrath which threatened vengeance on the whole house, opened the hall-door first. The visitors were the two partners of the firm, Augustus Hamblin and William the Silent, with Mr. Billiter, the family solicitor. Young Nick, at the top of the stairs, in readiness for flight, observed the arrival of this group with considerable curiosity. Something important was in the wind. He connected it with the row of the day before.

Kick—kick. 'Open this door!' roared Stephen, adding a

volley of oaths strong enough to throw into shudders the immortal gods who heard them. 'Open this door!'

'Really,' said Augustus, 'this is very scandalous language in a house where there are ladies. What is the meaning of it?'

The footman tried the handle of the door. It was locked, but the key was in it. He caught sight of young Nick as he turned the key, and at once divined the whole history. He, too, had the presence of mind, as Stephen emerged, raging, cursing, and swearing, to retreat behind the portly form of Mr. Augustus Hamblin.

For a moment Stephen, who was blind and speechless with wrath, did not see who were grouped before him, as he stood and stamped, hurling incoherent oaths at all the world. Young Nick had dropped down to the lowest step of the stairs, which just left his eyes half-an-inch above the level of the hall floor. Thus, from a comparatively safe spot, he enjoyed a complete view of the proceedings, which interested him profoundly.

'What does this mean?' asked Augustus. 'Is the man mad?'

'What do you want here?' returned Stephen, foaming at the mouth. 'This is my house.'

'Not at all,' said Augustus. 'It is not your house until the Court awards it to you. It is Alison's house. We are here to protect her, and to see that you leave the place immediately.'

'Leave the place? Leave my own house?' cried Stephen.

'Certainly. It is presumably Alison's until you have succeeded in acquiring a legal title to it. You must go away, and that at once. We shall remain here until you do.'

Stephen hesitated. It was a strange thing that a man so versed in all the ways of the world should have jumped to the conclusion that all he had to do was to step at once into his brother's place, and stay there.

'Understand, pray,' said Mr. Billiter, 'you have no more power to occupy this house than you have to receive your brother's rents and dividends. After the announcement you made to us all yesterday, we have come to the conclusion that it is no longer becoming or decent that you should be allowed to remain here, under the same roof as Miss Hamblin.'

'And if I choose to remain?'

Black Hamblin looked dark as midnight. Mr. Billiter laughed, and rubbed his hands.

'Really,' he said, 'one hardly likes to contemplate such an emergency. You see, nothing is yours until you prove your case. Meantime, everything is presumably ours. It makes one think of physical force. No doubt—but it is absurd—no doubt the footman, gardener, and grooms could, between them, be able to effect an—ha! ha!—an ejectment.'

'I go,' said Stephen, 'but under protest. I go from here to my own lawyers. If I am advised that I am entitled to live here, I shall return.'

Young Nick slowly mounted the stairs. A delicious surprise awaited him. The coat which he had mistaken for the doctor's belonged to Stephen. Here was a joyful chance!

Stephen, with a face as full of dignified remonstrance as could be compassed on so short a notice, and after half-an-hour of such unrestrained wrath, took down his coat, and began, in a slow and stagelike way, to put it on. The action in itself is capable of being filled with 'business' and effect, as my readers have often observed upon the stage.

'You will all of you,' said Stephen, taking the coat by the collar, and adjusting it with the right hand, so as to bring the left sleeve into position, 'you will all of you regret the tone which you have been pleased to adopt towards me.' Then he thrust his hand into the sleeve half-way, and brought the coat round with a swing to the right. 'I claim, as any man would, his bare rights. Let justice be done.' Here he thrust his right arm into the corresponding sleeve. 'I am met with unworthy and undeserved accusations.' Then he hitched the coat higher up, and perceived, but without alarm for the moment, that there was some obstacle in both the sleeves.

The faces of his three opponents watched him with grave and solemn looks.

It was the grandest spectacle which this world offers—that of baffled villainy. The virtuous, rejoicing in their virtue, were for the moment triumphant. Nothing better can ever be invented in fiction than this situation of real life. And to think that it was completely fooled away by such a paltry trick as sewing up a coat-sleeve.

Having delivered himself, Stephen wished only to retreat with dignity. There was only one drawback. He could not get his arms through the sleeves. The unrelenting three gazed upon him with cold and severe eyes, while he scowled as fiercely as any villain in stage-story. But there comes a time when severity must relax and scowling becomes oppressive. The more Stephen plunged at his coat-sleeves, the more they resisted.

'Damn the coat!' he cried, losing his patience.

Charles, the footman, came to his assistance.

He it was, instructed by experience, who discovered the truth.

'I think it's Master Nicolas, sir,' he said; 'he's sewed you up, sir. If you have a penknife——'

The two partners smiled: the lawyer smiled: severity vanished. Stephen swore; the partners laughed aloud; the

dignity of the revengeful bravo disappeared. It was with a very poor flourish that he finally put on his hat and left the house.

'You will understand, Charles,' said Augustus, 'that under no circumstances is Mr. Stephen allowed to enter this house again, until you hear from us or from Mr. Billiter.'

He led the way into Alison's room.

'You had my letter, Cousin Augustus—you have heard the dreadful news?' asked the girl, who was standing at the window, wondering what all the talk and noise in the hall meant.

'I have heard, my dear. We are here, your cousins, to protect you. Your uncle Stephen has left the house, and will not return to it.'

'Oh! tell me you do not believe it—what he says!'

'We certainly do not,' said Augustus. 'We do not know what case he has, if any; but we hold his position to be impossible. We believe in your late father, my dear: we are confident that we shall establish your claims to be what he always led us to believe you, his legal daughter and his heiress.'

He kissed her on the forehead, a rare distinction with a man so grave as Augustus Hamblin.

'I concur,' said William the Silent, and kissed her too.

'And as for me,' said Mr. Billiter, taking her hand, 'you see in me, my dear young lady, your most faithful and obedient servant. Never doubt that we shall succeed.'

'And am I and my boy to be turned out?' asked poor Mrs. Cridland.

'Certainly not, Flora,' replied Augustus. 'We want you to continue your kind services to'—he made a profound bow—'to my late cousin's heiress, Anthony's daughter, Alison Hamblin.'

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW A YOUNG MAN MAY PROSPER.

MENTION has been made of one Jack Baker, capitalist, successful merchant, and private friend of Stephen Hamblin, envied and admired by the coterie of the Birch-Tree Tavern. In the capacity of Stephen's adviser and confidant, he has something to do with this story, which is an excuse for relating the history of his rise and greatness. Another excuse is that it is a most instructive history. Marmontel was nowhere more moral. It is so moral that it has half a dozen morals. And as I have ever held it a great mistake to put the moral at the end instead of

the beginning, I append all six morals in this place so that my readers may see how beautifully this Jack, who killed the monstrous giant of poverty and servitude, may be moralised to suit the special difficulties of these latter days.

The first moral is that everything is possible to him who dares.

The second, that the world at large, and especially the genial and confiding manager of your bank, is ready to meet you half way in taking you at your own estimate.

The third, that in this world you only have to help yourself. Piles of money are lying about; the man who makes his own pile is invariably succeeded by a fool who asks for nothing but a certain originality of audacity in the adventurer who deprives him of his share.

The fourth, that the proverb *ex nihilo nihil fit* only applies to natural philosophy, the properties of matter, and so forth. It has nothing whatever to do with credit. The man who wants most gets most. It is the bold pauper who becomes rich, if he begins early. Further proof of this axiom may be sought in the chronicles of the City.

The fifth, that smartness still lingers among the English, and still commands success.

There is a sixth which we reserve for the sequel. It is left for the readers of the Higher Thought, as Paul Rondelet says, to find out for themselves.

Jack Baker was at this time about two-and-thirty years of age, a good dozen years younger than Stephen Hamblin. His father began and ended as an employé in a great City house. He was a model clerk; he possessed all the clerical virtues; he was respectful, punctual, obedient, honest, trustworthy; as he was never called upon to take any serious responsibility, he was never troubled with ideas: yet his talk was entirely about money, and he admired financial *coups* much as a stage-carpenter admires a play, being perfectly ignorant how they were designed and carried through. He brought up his only son—most City clerks have at least a dozen sons—to regard the City as the only arena profitable for English youth. The professions, the army, the navy, the colonies, had no attraction for young Jack Baker: he was 'to go into the City,' for that he was specially set apart in infancy; he had no sympathy for deeds of daring adventure and heroism: his heart never warmed for self-sacrifice or patriotism: as a child he turned aside from St. George and the Dragon, and loved to hear of Dick Whittington. When he grew older, his favourite reading was of men who have made their fortunes in the City from small beginnings. And when he was old enough to understand things better, he recognised the fact that the lord mayor was a poor creature, stripped of

his civic robes of office, compared with such a man as Mr. Anthony Hamblin, whose house on Clapham Common he saw every half-holiday when he played upon that hospitable heath.

When Jack was fifteen, and was a tolerable proficient in arithmetic, commercial English, and clerkly handwriting, he fulfilled the purposes of his birth and existence by entering as a junior clerk, the house of Sandal, Wood and Company, silk-merchants.

For twelve years he remained a clerk in this establishment. His life during this period resembled that of most other City clerks, except that he indulged in no wild courses: did not bet, did not drink, did not scatter and lavish his little income, did not fall into debt, did not acquire a bad reputation; on the contrary his reputation steadily grew in the house and out of it: he became known for a shrewd, trustworthy young fellow who could manage a thing without making himself a fool over it: and he was unlike many of his fellows in this respect, that he did not marry when his salary reached the magnificent sum of a hundred and fifty pounds a year. As regards his manner of living, it was necessarily simple, yet he managed to secure as much enjoyment as could well be got out of so limited an income. He did not waste his money in joining any young men's improvement society, nor his time in following any line of study, and he cared nothing at all for lectures, scientific, literary, political, or musical. His tastes lay in quite a contrary direction. He knew many barmaids, haunted many billiard-rooms, was frequently seen at music-halls, and smoked a meerschaum pipe all the evening. This was the kind of life he liked after office-hours. It did him no harm, because in these places he was on his natural level, higher than which he never cared to rise; and because, being a young man of no imagination, strong common-sense, and rather a cold temperament, he never exceeded and never committed any of those follies which cling to a man's reputation, are not easily shaken off, and sometimes drag him down in the long-run. Topsy at the Green Dragon, or Polly at Quelch's, or Lotty at the Princely, sometimes thought, no doubt, that Jack Baker was so carried away by admiration as to be ready to make a serious offer. But the young lady was greatly mistaken, for Jack was not such a fool. At the same time the society of Topsy, Polly, or Lotty, always, of course, with the bar between them, was pleasant to this young man of the City, and supplied the place of ladies' society. For with ladies Jack was not at his ease.

Moreover he nourished ambitions, which was another reason why he should not commit the usual clerkly error of an early marriage.

His father was old: there was a good sum put by: with that sum he would perhaps be able to start for himself, if only in

a small way. Meantime he was rising in the firm; he knew the country customers; he knew the travellers and the commission agents; he was known to the merchants of Shanghai and their clerks; he knew men who could introduce business, and he had the sense to hold his tongue and keep his own counsel.

When Jack was twenty-seven or so, his father died, leaving him the sole heir of his little savings. These he found, all charges deducted, to amount to the sum of £3,142 6s. 10d., which he placed, at first, on deposit-account in the London, Southwark, and Stepney Joint Stock Bank. He then resigned his post in Sandal, Wood and Company, and taking a small office in a court leading out of Eastcheap, started for himself as a silk-merchant. He passed a very active first year: he ran about asking for orders like an advertising tout: he hunted up the country customers whom he had met at Sandal and Woods: he remembered that an old schoolfellow was a clerk in Shanghai and wrote to him: he lived with the greatest frugality: and though he did very little business, he was cheerful, relied on promises, and hoped for better times.

After a year, he made up his books and found that he had lost a little by the first twelve months. This was discouraging.

In those days he used to go to the Birch-Tree Tavern for early dinner, and there made acquaintance with Alderney Codd and his friends. He greatly admired their ingenuity, and puzzled himself to discover why it was that with so much talent there was not a decent hat among them all, nor a shirt-collar whose edges were not frayed.

They were undoubtedly clever, these ingenious contrivers of schemes and companies. He used to sit silent among them listening. Nothing, however, was ever let fall by any of them which could be of practical benefit to himself in the silk trade. Unluckily, no one of the whole set had ever turned his attention to silk.

One afternoon, however, the man who looked like a sailor propounded sententiously the following proposition. He said:

'Whoever wishes, in this world, to succeed wants only one thing.' He looked round to see if any were rash enough to disagree with him. 'If it is to be President of a South American Republic, which is open to any man with cheek enough to bowl over the man in the chair and sit in it himself, or to become a great merchant, or to be thought a great financier, it's the same thing that is wanted, and that is—pluck.'

Jack received this theory without criticising it, and went back to his office.

Among his papers was a three months' acceptance that morning received from a country draper. He took this to the bank and asked to have it discounted.

'You may leave it,' said the manager, dubiously. 'I will tell you to-morrow. But it can't be done under 4½.'

The bank-rate was 3½.

Jack had still on deposit most of his £3,000. He concluded, therefore, to let the bill wait.

When he got home he found an answer to his letter to the old friend at Shanghai. Friend had gone into business as a broker on his own account. He wrote facetiously, regretting that Jack was not in a position to back him: if so, *what* a game they could have on, they two together; he at Shanghai and Jack in London! That silk was going up for a certainty, and now was the time—and so on.

Jack read the letter, put it down with a sigh, and spent his usual evening with Lotty and Polly and Topsy, who served him with his moderate potations, and exchanged with him those epigrams, those quaint and original conceits, those madrigals in prose, those quips and merry jests which constitute the charm and poetry of barmaid conversation. Then he went home and retired to bed and to sleep. It was not unusual with him to go to sleep, but in this case it led to important results.

At two o'clock he sat up with a start, and looked about the room half-frightened. He had been awakened by a dream. He dreamed that the man who looked like a sailor had come all the way from the Birch-Tree Tavern to his bedside in order to repeat to him, with warning finger, 'Whether you want to be President of Bolivia, or a great and successful merchant, all you want is—pluck!'

He rubbed his eyes and stared in the darkness. He could see nothing but the dim outlines of furniture. The man who looked like a sailor was not there. No one was there; but the voice of his dreaming still rang in Jack's ear. He slept no more. At six he rose, feverish and dazzled. He had been 'alone with his thought' for four hours; it was too much for him. He was not an imaginative young man, and yet perhaps for that very reason, because he had so seldom contemplated anything beyond the present, the prospect dazzled him.

At half-past ten, with cheeks a little white, but with assured and confident bearing, Jack walked boldly through the outer office of the bank into the manager's room. Yesterday he had, so to speak, sneaked in with his country draper's little bill at three months.

'I want,' he began, in a clear, ringing voice, very different from the grovelling hesitation of a man who presents a doubtful little bill for discount, 'I want a credit of £20,000. I am shipping silk at Shanghai.'

'Sit down, Mr. Baker,' said the manager, blandly. 'Yes—you are shipping silk. Yes—our terms are 8 per cent.'

That was all. In one moment, without hesitation or questions, the business was as good as concluded. Jack walked out of the bank with reddened cheek and brightened eye. He wanted to get into his own office, and sit down to realise that his fortune was made or marred by this bold venture.

The nature of the transaction was simple. Jack did not borrow £20,000 at 8 per cent. Not at all: no money was exchanged; he borrowed credit at that rate: he bought and shipped to England silk to the amount of £20,000 in his own name; if silk went up there would be a profit, if silk went down there would be a loss; if the former, he would pay the bank £1,600 and pocket the rest; if the latter, he would pay the differences *and* the £1,600 out of his own capital of £3,000. It will be seen that the margin for safety in case of a fall was small.

There was no loss: Jack's correspondent was right: there was a large profit, for silk went up.

Jack was prudent: he let the profit remain in the bank: continued to live frugally; but next time he asked for a credit of £30,000, which was also granted him.

That operation was again successful.

Another and yet another succeeded. Jack's name became favourably known. Jack's capital was trebled. His ventures were larger.

He took larger offices and engaged more clerks. He had made already a good business of the speculative kind, which report magnified into a great business of the safe kind.

He next gave up the modest lodgings in Bloomsbury which had hitherto contented him, took chambers in the West End, joined a new proprietary club (where he made the acquaintance of Stephen Hamblin), took to playing whist there, and of course, because his temperament was cool and his memory good, and he never forgot a card, always won; bought a horse and rode in the Park; remembered that he had a second name, and wrote on his card: Mr. J. Bunter Baker. In other matters he lived exactly as he had always done, without the least desire for the society of ladies, conversing with Polly, Lotty, and Topsy aforesaid, and raising golden visions in the minds of those young persons; and even continuing on affable terms with his old associates, still mostly clerks, and envious beyond measure of a success which their want of pluck made impossible for them. At his West-End chambers he gave little dinners, to which he invited his new friends, Stephen Hamblin, the manager of the London, Southwark and Stepney Bank, and others. The wine he gave them was choice; after dinner, it was not unusual to have a little lansquenet, baccarat, loo, or perhaps an écarté

pool. But Jack Baker was too wary to lose his head over cards, and generally came out of the *mêlée* a winner.

To these dinners, it is needless to add, Mr. J. Bunter Baker did not invite his former friends. It was enough that he should stand them drinks at the bar: it was, indeed, all they asked. Tears rose to the eyes of those honest fellows when they thought of the magnificence to which one of their number had soared. Like Baker *père*, deceased, they were satisfied to contemplate success from afar, without dreaming that it might be their own case. But then they never had that vision of the night—they never heard that voice which said: 'Whether you wish to be President of a South American Republic or a successful merchant, one thing only is wanted—pluck.'

It is, indeed, one of the most remarkable circumstances attendant on success, that while all the world envies the successful man, not one in a hundred considers how he himself might win that same success by following parallel lines.

As for the Birch-Tree Tavern, Jack Baker, as we have seen, did not forsake that festive place. Luncheon was to be had there as well as anywhere else, and perhaps a wrinkle might be picked up among those inventors of schemes and contrivers of companies. And it was not unpleasant for a man of Jack Baker's coarse fibre to be received with deference: a respect due to the man who has made money was paid him in full measure, and even ostentatiously; the newest schemes were explained, the latest ideas were aired, for his benefit; the house, so to speak, played up to the capitalist; Jack Baker who had made his own fortune, was ready to make that of everybody else. When will men understand that he who wants to make his fortune must do it by himself?

Stephen Hamblin did not commit the error common among vulgar practitioners of his school. He did not, that is, confide his case to the hands of a pettifogging solicitor. He took it to a firm of the utmost respectability, told the whole exact truth, and only asked that the affair should be pushed on as rapidly as possible. This done, he felt easier. The fight would come off; the sooner the better. Let it come. About the issue he felt generally, though there were times of doubt, pretty confident.

He dined at his club with Jack Baker. After dinner, in the smoking-room, he talked darkly about what was going to happen. Presently he opened up the matter more fully.

'What I mean,' he said, 'what I meant yesterday, is that I am myself the claimant to the whole of my late brother's property.'

'Phew!' Jack Baker whistled. 'The whole? Why it is—how much—a quarter of a million?'

'More,' said Stephen. 'We have now found out that he never married. It is, of course, hard upon the girl.'

'Oh, hang the girl!' Jack replied, with his ready laugh. 'Number one comes first. And, of course, if it isn't her own she can't have it. When do you come into possession?'

'That I do not know. My lawyers will ask for letters of administration. The other side may possibly ask for time, in order to prove the marriage, or they may choose not to fight. I cannot tell.'

'Oh—h!' Jack's face fell. 'They may choose to fight. And suppose they win?'

Stephen lay back in his chair, crossed his legs, and laughed gently.

'My dear boy, how *can* they win, when I hold in my hands proof—not documentary proof, which would satisfy a court of law, but moral proof—that my brother never was married at all?'

'Have you? Then that's all right, and I congratulate you with all my heart.'

They shook hands.

'You have not done so badly yourself, Jack.'

'Well, no,' he replied, stroking his chin. 'Not so very bad, considering my opportunities. But a quarter of a million! Mon Dew! as the French say. Who can compare with that? What I complain of, however, is having anything to do at all. Why weren't we all born rich? Why don't we live in the good old days when they had slaves, and all they had to do was to enjoy life?'

'Perhaps,' Stephen suggested gloomily, 'we might have been born slaves ourselves.'

'That,' Jack acknowledged, 'would have been the very devil.'

'Now, Jack,' said Stephen, leaning forwards, and speaking seriously, 'I have told you of my prospects. Let me tell you something more. This is, of course, perfectly confidential.'

The club smoking-room was quite empty at their end of it.

'Go on, old man.'

'Anthony's death came at an awkward time for me. He and I were in a good big thing together, though his name was not mentioned, and it's come to grief. My money is locked up here and there. I have lost a devil of a lot lately; and, in fact, I want to raise money until I get possession.'

'Security?'

'First of all, the estate itself. If that won't do, any amount of bonds and scrip.'

It is almost needless to say that Anthony had never speculated with Stephen in his life, and equally needless to say that the only 'scrip' in Stephen's possession consisted of 'pictures,' chiefly from Honduras, certain South American Republics, and sundry bogus American Railways, got up by pirates on both sides of the Atlantic.

'I would rather not go to my banker's,' Stephen went on. 'Can you help me to a private lender—anybody—a friend of your own would do?'

Jack nodded, and went on quietly sucking his cigar in silence for a few minutes. Then he made up his mind, and spoke.

'I don't suppose,' he said, 'that a sensible man like yourself, and a man of the world like yourself, would go in for a claim which you weren't pretty sure of carrying through. Nothing short of certainty would justify you in breaking with your family, supposing, as you say, they consider the thing as an act of hostility. I believe, on your own showing, that you are bound to win. And I don't mind risking something. Still, it is a risk. You will have to pay for the risk.'

'Certainly.'

'I will lend you a thousand, Hamblin,' he went on slowly, 'on condition of your paying me back two thousand on the day that you get your brother's estate.'

Stephen laughed.

'Only cent. per cent.,' he said. 'Never mind. I don't want any one to know how my affairs have been dipped of late. I accept, Jack. You can make it a couple of hundred in cash, and eight hundred in a three months' bill. My dear boy,' he added with feeling, 'when I do come into my brother's money, we will have such a caper, you and I together, with a friend or two, as you shall remember all your life. Hang it! One *must* be five-and-forty to enjoy things properly.'

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THE BATTLE WAS BEGUN.

Alderney Codd, the news of Stephen's claim having reached him, fell into a doubt and quandary the like of which he had never before experienced, because he saw that he must take a side. For quiet people, trimmers, friends of both camps, undecided thinkers, uncertain reasoners, and philosophers who change their views with the wind, it is most grievous to have to take a side. Suppose, for instance, they were to disestablish the

Church: suppose there was to be a civil war between republicans and royalists: suppose your paternal uncle, from whom you had expectations, held one view firmly, while your maternal aunt, from whom also you had expectations, took the other side forcibly, what then, reader, would your own feelings be? Such, however, was Alderney Codd's position. On the one hand, his long and early friendship with Stephen; the memory of a thousand youthful freaks and extravagances; the habit acquired in youth, and still maintained, of regarding Stephen as an adviser, and, in a sense, his superior; the familiarity of his associations with him—these were on one side: on the other were his respect and his loyalty to the Hamblin name, gratitude to the memory of Anthony, duty to his daughter, and the belief that Stephen's position was a wrong one.

He was torn with conflicting emotions. If he considered the thing from a practical point of view, it was difficult to discern which was the safe side to take. For if Stephen gained the day, and he should be found in the enemy's camp, what then? Or if Alison should be victorious, and he were a partisan of Stephen, with what face could he greet her again?

He was finally determined by perfectly disinterested considerations. The sight of Anthony's coat hanging before his eyes determined him.

He lost no time in acting upon his resolution. First, he repaired to Clapham, where he sought an interview with Alison and tendered his allegiance; this once offered and accepted, he felt easier and more comfortable in his mind, and sought Stephen at his chambers.

Poor Alderney! He had been so many times to those familiar chambers; he had spent so many evenings in them; he had smoked so many pipes, cigars, and cigarettes; he had imbibed in them so prodigious a quantity of intoxicating drinks; he had been always welcome there. And now he was about to say that he could never come there any more. Stephen, he knew, was not, from a high moral point of view, a good man. Quite the contrary. But then Stephen was always a friend of Alderney's, and one forgives a great deal in those whose friendship has lasted for thirty years or so. Perhaps, too, his own standard of morality was not of the highest. And Stephen was one of the Hamblins, to know whom was to gain a certain distinction at the Birch-Tree. Now, all that fabric of friendship, pride, and distinction was to be rudely shattered.

'Come in, Alderney,' cried Stephen in his most cheery voice; 'come in, man. I haven't seen you for a month, have I? Come in.'

Alderney turned very red.

'The fact is, Stephen,' he stammered, 'I have come—have

come—in fact, to tell you that I have heard of your claim, and that I—in fact—I entirely disapprove of it.'

'Do you, Alderney, and why?'

'Because Alison is Anthony's daughter; because out of gratitude——'

Stephen's face clouded over.

'Come, Alderney: don't be sentimental, and don't be Quixotic. No one would be such a fool as to let go a quarter of a million of money—his own, too.'

'But it is not your own: it is Alison's.'

'I say that it *is* my own. I say that Alison's mother was never married.'

'You cannot prove it.'

'It is for her, on the other hand, to prove the contrary. If there was a marriage it can be proved with the greatest ease. But there was none.'

For an instant Alderney wavered.

Stephen saw his look of irresolution.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that you feel you ought to support Anthony's daughter. Well, the feeling does you credit. Support her, by all means. But not to the extent of injustice, Alderney. Don't you see that the estate, since there was no marriage, is all mine? Can you blame me for merely taking what is mine?'

'Yes,' said Alderney, plucking up his spirits; 'I blame you for bringing scandal upon the family: what need to rake up the past? Even supposing your allegation to be true, which I do not believe, what good does it do to let all the world know it? Why, I hear they offered you five hundred a year for life, solely for taking charge of Alison for one year. I'd have done that job, Stephen, for a quarter of the money. Five hundred pounds a year!'

'A splendid sum, isn't it?' Stephen sneered. 'A fair equivalent for ten thousand a year. Don't be an ass, Alderney. Scandal on the family, too: because one of them is proved never to have married. Rubbish!'

'Then I will say more, Stephen. I think that respect for Anthony's memory, if not consideration for his child, ought to have prevailed upon you to prevent this misery from falling upon her.'

Alderney folded his arms firmly as he took his stand.

Stephen, as usual, lost his temper.

'Very well,' he said; 'I've heard what you came to say, and now, if you have nothing more to say, you may go. Of course you understand, Alderney, that any little assistance which I could have offered as the head of the Hamblin family will be withheld if you choose to ally yourself with my enemies.'

'I understand,' Alderney replied sadly, thinking of his poor hundred pounds a year, and wondering how that little income was to be supplemented for the future. 'Good-bye, Stephen; shake hands before I go, old man. I am more sorry than I can tell you to be obliged to take this line. But Anthony and his daughter must come first. You will change your mind yet, and withdraw your claim.'

'I will do nothing of the kind.'

'Then, Stephen, I hope to God that you will be defeated. That would be better for you than to win, and to feel all the rest of your life that you were eating the bread of Anthony's orphan.'

Stephen made an impatient gesture.

'Come, shake hands,' Alderney repeated, holding out his own.

'No,' said Stephen, turning his back upon him; 'I only shake hands with my friends.'

Alderney Codd withdrew. His lifelong friendship with Stephen was at an end. More than that, he reflected with bitterness that Stephen held in his hands the whole scheme for the formation of the Great Glass Spoon Company, by which he had hoped to make another coup. Well, it could not be helped. No doubt Stephen would float that company and do well with it.

For reasons which will presently appear, Stephen did not float the company.

Alderney next went into the City, and called at the office in Great St. Simon Apostle. He could not have arrived at a more lucky moment, for a great family council, called together in haste, was just meeting to consider the best course to pursue. The Dean was there, the Colonel was there, the two partners, the family lawyer, and Gilbert Yorke. Alderney sent in his name, and was invited to join the Hamblin parliament.

The proceedings were opened by Augustus, in the private office of Anthony Hamblin, deceased, in a little speech.

'You all know,' he said, 'that our cousin Anthony left no will: you all know that he maintained a profound silence on the subject of his marriage. We have now to tell you, Dean, and you, Colonel, that Stephen Hamblin, asserting that there was never any marriage at all, is about to claim the whole estate. We have asked you together in order to confer on the best manner of meeting that claim. Mr. Billiter is so good as to give us the benefit of his legal opinion. Mr. Gilbert Yorke has as good a right to be present as any of us, for he is engaged to Alison——'

'Pardon me,' said Gilbert, reddening to the roots of his hair. 'Alison will not hear of any engagement, she says, until she can meet the world without having to blush for her mother.'

'That does her credit,' said Augustus, and the Dean applauded. 'Very well, cousins, we think that an effort may be made to establish the fact of this marriage; and of that fact, I am sure, no one here can entertain the least doubt.'

No one did.

'Mr. Yorke has very kindly offered,' he went on, 'to give up his whole time for the search, which may possibly be long and tedious. He abandons his practice at the Bar——'

'Pardon me again,' said Gilbert, 'my practice is nothing. I have no practice. All I give up is the waiting all day long in chambers for briefs which never come.'

'Well,' said Mr. Billiter, with a twinkle in his ferret-like eyes, 'well, there's a very pretty fortune depending upon the success of that search. Don't fire up, young man: lovers never do think of fortunes. We all know that; and Miss Hamblin is a most beautiful and well-conditioned young lady; and we give you credit for entirely disinterested feelings.'

'Allow me, too,' said Alderney, 'to offer my own humble services. In the present depressed state of the City, my usual financial work has almost stopped. I have not engineered a new company for a twelvemonth.' Everybody smiled; Alderney's companies were well known. 'I am comparatively free, and shall be glad to give whatever services I can to the cause of my benefactor's daughter. I never knew her mother; but we may say, I am sure, in the words of the poet, "*Matre pulchrâ, filia pulchrior.*"'

Alderney had touched the right cord. Anthony Hamblin, the worthy Head of the House, had been, in one way or the other, a benefactor to everybody in the room. The Dean thought of days before the Deanery came to him, when his boys would certainly not have gone to Marlborough but for Anthony; the Colonel thought how his two boys, in the Engineers and Artillery, would certainly never have got to Woolwich had it not been for Anthony; the two partners thought of numberless acts of kindness in the old days when all were young together; even the old lawyer owed something to this universal benefactor, this dispenser of kindliness, this secret doer of good deeds. A hush fell upon them for a moment. Then the Dean cleared his throat, which had gone suddenly a little husky

'We must accept your offer with gratitude, Cousin Alderney. Yes—yes—our benefactor's daughter must not look in vain to her cousins for help.'

'I concur,' said William the Silent.

'I have just come from seeing my cousin Stephen,' Alderney went on. 'I thought it right, before breaking off the friendship which has always existed between us, to go and make some sort of appeal to his better nature. I know,' he added, with a blush, 'that our friendship has been marked by many a youth-

ful folly, which one may repent of, but which one—one—in fact—always looks back to with some degree of pleasure.' The Dean looked professionally grave. 'I told him then, that I would have neither part nor lot with him in this matter.'

'Very good,' said Augustus, approvingly.

'When I considered,' Alderney went on, 'that I actually had on at that moment the very coat which Anthony lent me, I could have no other feeling but indignation and astonishment. And, in addition to the coat,'—he drew out a leather pocket-book full of papers—'I had with me, come back to me after many days, an actual I.O.U. of my own, given by me to Anthony twenty years ago—twenty—years—ago'—he repeated this with great pathos—'for five-and-twenty pounds.' He handed it to Augustus with pride. 'Stephen found it among the papers. It is not often that one's good deeds return in such a manner. Gentlemen, I give you my word that at this moment I only regret that the document represents so small a sum. I wish it had been for ten times the amount. However, at the time I did my best.'

There was a beautiful confusion between self-interest and the finest kind of generosity which moved all present.

'Very good,' said Augustus. 'Now let us consider the position from a common-sense point of view. Here is Mr. Billiter to correct us if we are led astray by an over-natural prejudice in favour of poor Anthony. We have this fact against us: there is not anywhere the slightest mention of marriage or love affair in Anthony's letters or diaries. Yet the latter are kept with the greatest care, and in the most minute detail.'

'As there must have been at least love-passages of some kind,' said the Colonel, 'does not that prove intentional omission?'

'I think it may. We need not, therefore, be discouraged at the outset by this omission. As the Colonel says, there must have been love-passages, probably letters. These are all probably destroyed; concealment was intentional.'

'Men in my profession,' said Mr. Billiter, 'are not likely to believe blindly in anybody. It is the seamy side which we generally have placed before us. At the same time, I knew Anthony Hamblin from his childhood upwards. I seem, like yourselves, to have known him most intimately—say from hour to hour. And if I were going to choose a man in whose virtue and honour I would believe, that man would be Anthony Hamblin.'

'I concur,' said William the Silent, for the second time.

'Having said so much,' Mr. Billiter went on, 'I come to the next point. Are we ready to carry this investigation through-out? Are we prepared for whatever may turn up? Of course

something will. It is impossible that a child should be born, a mother die, a man marry, without leaving some trace or other, which we shall be able to light upon after careful investigation! Are you prepared, young man'—he fixed his bright eyes upon Gilbert, who bore the shock without flinching—'to face all consequences?'

'I am!' Gilbert replied. 'The truth cannot be so bad for Alison to bear as the present uncertainty, when every chance allusion, every thought, any accident, puts the doubt before her, and makes a fresh demand upon her faith in her father. Let us, in Heaven's name, learn the truth.'

'Good!' said the Dean.

'Very well, then,' observed Mr. Billiter, dryly, 'we are all agreed, we think, that Anthony Hamblin will come well out of it; we hope he will. If he does not, we are prepared to surrender the high opinion we had formed of his virtue, and accept the consequences. You, gentlemen,' he turned to the partners, 'you are more deeply concerned than even Alison herself?'

'We are,' said Augustus. 'But the House would stand even such a shock as that which you contemplate.' He meant if Stephen should withdraw his money.

'Then we return to the question,' said Mr. Billiter: 'What are we to do?'

Nobody spoke for a time. Then Alderney lifted up his voice:

'Advertise!' he said. 'Go on advertising!'

Augustus groaned.

'We advertised everywhere when Anthony was drowned. One would like to avoid the agony column of the *Times* if we could.'

'There is no possible avoidance of publicity,' said Mr. Billiter. 'The Court of Probate will be asked for letters. We shall have to oppose. We shall have to state why we oppose. The Court does not sit with closed doors. There will be a great deal of talk about it before we have done, I fear. Of course, it is disagreeable to quiet people to be talked of in every newspaper in the kingdom.'

Alderney was already at work with paper and pencil.

'It is nothing less than horrible,' said Augustus, 'that our name—the name of Anthony Hamblin—should be mixed up in such a vulgar difficulty as an uncertain marriage.'

He spoke as if the fierce sunlight of fame should shine upon every action of a Hamblin and make it known to the people.

'Nothing in the world like an advertisement,' said Alderney, working away. 'You spend a guinea in the *Times*, and another guinea in the *Guardian*. All the parish clerks in all the parishes in the country are immediately set to work in hope of getting

the reward. You ought to stimulate them by offering a high reward. Now, then, will this do?

'"Two Hundred Pounds Reward!" That is not too much, is it? No! "Two Hundred Pounds Reward.—Wanted, the Certificate of Marriage of Anthony Hamblin, merchant, of Great St. Simon Apostle, City of London, and Clapham Common, with some person unknown. It is believed that the marriage took place in or near London, about twenty to twenty-three years ago. The above reward will be paid on receiving a certified copy of the register." That sounds well,' said Alderney. 'Two hundred pounds will make them work. But that is not enough. We must have another advertisement to find out Alison's mother. Here it is:

'"Two Hundred Pounds Reward.—Whereas Anthony Hamblin, deceased, formerly merchant, Great St. Simon Apostle, City of London and Clapham Common, is believed to have contracted marriage some twenty to twenty-two or three years ago, with a person unknown; the above reward is offered to anyone who will give such information as will lead to the discovery of the person and the place and date of marriage; and any persons who are cognisant of the marriage, who are connected with the wife of Anthony Hamblin, or who lost any female relation by flight, elopement, abduction or disappearance about that time, are requested to communicate full particulars to the undersigned.'

Here followed the name and address of the solicitors.

'There,' said Alderney, with great satisfaction, 'that will fetch the house—I mean, wake up the church.'

'Very clearly put,' said Mr. Billiter. 'It is a pity that you were not made a lawyer, Mr. Codd.'

Alderney smiled. This was the sort of tribute to his intellect that he enjoyed.

'Thank you, Mr. Billiter. But—*quid Romæ faciam?* Yet, if ripe scholarship and an intimate acquaintance with Latin literature could be of any use in that profession—but I fear it is too late.'

'There was a Mrs. Duncombe,' said Gilbert, 'who took charge of Alison for six or eight years, should we not get hold of her?'

'Good,' cried the intelligent Alderney, grasping more paper: 'the very thing. Mrs. Duncombe by all means. Another advertisement. Two hundred—no, hang it!—Five pounds reward will do for her. Mrs. Duncombe will be easy enough to find. There is no mystery about her, at any rate. "Five Pounds Reward.—Wanted, the present address of Mrs. Duncombe, who for eight years had charge of a little girl at Brighton—initials, A. H." And now I look upon our case as complete—quite complete.'

Alderney looked about him as if the work was already done.

'We will advertise, then,' said Augustus. 'Is there no other way of working? Can we not use some private inquiry office?'

They all had the old-fashioned respect for detectives, thinking they could solve any mystery. But Alderney shook his head. His faith was not so great.

'They can do nothing more than other men,' he said. 'Gilbert Yorke and I will be your best detectives. They get up the facts of a case just as we have done, and then advertise. That is just exactly what we are doing. And then they sit down and wait for replies—anyone can do that.'

'And now,' said Gilbert, 'for our own individual work. If Mr. Billiter will allow me, I will receive all the answers to the advertisements and report progress whenever any discovery takes place.'

'And I,' said Alderney, 'will begin at once a private search in all the London parish registers. When I have gone through those, I will tackle the suburban churches. After that—but that is as far as we shall get.'

'All this, Alderney,' said Augustus, 'will require money. You must not give us your time for nothing—at least, you must let us pay your expenses.'

Poor Alderney blushed. He really had no employment for his time at the moment, for no one, up to the present, had shown any desire to join in the promotion of the Great Glass Spoon Company. And there were five weeks to Quarter Day, and, to meet all expenses for those five-and-thirty days, there was no more than the sum of five-and-thirty shillings, with a silver watch, a gold chain, a gold medal once won at college for a theological essay, and two rings. These articles of jewellery spent the latter part of every Quarter-day in charge of an obliging person who received them in trust, so to speak. Sometimes they remained 'in' for a good six months, during which interval Alderney only knew the time by looking in bakers' shops, or the stations of the Underground Railway; by the pangs of hunger, and by the diurnal phenomena of nature.

Had it not been such an unfavourable time for him, he would rather have done the work for nothing. But poor men cannot do generous and self-sacrificing things. He could not refuse the proffered money. And when Augustus, at parting, pressed into his hand a piece of paper which, as a rapid glance showed Alderney, was worth exactly fifty pounds, he was affected almost to tears.

'Your resemblance, Cousin Augustus,' he said, 'to our poor Cousin Anthony deceased, becomes every day more marked. *O si sic omnes!*'

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW THE COURT WAS HARD TO PERSUADE.

The tendency of humanity in this its fallen state to believe everything that is evil of each other has been often illustrated by the ingenious tribe of poets and novelists. The Hamblin cousinhood may, in all future ages, be cited as another and very remarkable case in point. The thing had only to be asserted in order to be immediately believed; and yet it was in direct contradiction to everything the world had previously held and acknowledged. Stephen said it was so. Stephen had always been the black sheep: Anthony had always been the respected chief of the House; yet Anthony's character was swept away by one single assertion of Stephen's. Enjoyment of the kind which is caused by surprise was also felt in the situation. Here was a striking example of the uncertainty of fortune: here was a turning of the wheel: here was a sudden sprawling in the mud of those who had been perched in apparent security on the highest point. No such reverse of fortune had ever befallen the Hamblin family except, perhaps, in the case of that member of it who, being on a voyage of adventure in the Indian Ocean, had his ship scuttled, and was himself made to walk a most uncomfortable and suicidal plank laid down for him by pirates of Sumatra. It was something, the cousins felt, but did not express the feeling in words, something for the annals of the family, in the interests of morality and philosophy, to show such a beautiful example of the instability of human greatness as that of Alison Hamblin. The case of Crœsus himself, although he saved himself at the last moment by an artful conundrum, could not have furnished his cousins, nephews, nieces, and marriage-connections with a more fertile topic of daily talk than the situation of Alison, the once fortunate, the beautiful Alison, provided for the family circle.

The female cousins pretended not to believe the story, out of deference to the partners, who were stout in their repudiation of Stephen's claim. But they *did* believe it at heart, and they whispered to each other words of doubt, pity, and suspicion, which served as an encouragement in belief. And the more they opened their eyes, raised their eyebrows, made round O's of their mouths, shook their heads, wagged their curls, lifted their shoulders, spread out their hands, and whispered words, the more they came to regard the story as not only probable, but certainly true.

No one liked Stephen. It was a fashion in the family to regard him as their least enviable possession. For his sake, and by means of his example, all Spaniards were supposed by the Hamblins to be profligate; how else to account for his extraordinary divergence from the recognised standards? All other Hamblins had done well: there were Hamblins in the Church, Hamblins in the Army and Navy, Hamblins at the Bar, Hamblins in Medicine—it was a part of the family tradition that a Hamblin should turn out well. And here was one who had never done any good at all. No Hamblin could contemplate without emotion the picture of Stephen the prodigal, Stephen the spendthrift, Stephen who was actually not satisfied with one fatted calf, but went on working his unrepentant way through a dozen of those toothsome creatures.

It was, however, instructive to mark the difference which the new position of things produced. One may not love the Heir Presumptive, but one must pray for the King. It became a subject of serious, even prayerful, consideration with the cousins whether they ought not to call upon Stephen, so long neglected. One or two did actually leave cards at his chambers in Pall Mall. Stephen found them and threw them behind the fire. He was completely indifferent to the action of his relations. They had long since passed out of his thoughts; they did not enter into any part or relation of his life. If he thought of them at all, it was as forming part of the family which had treated him with neglect, and whom in return he would humble if he could.

He lost no time, however, after the final interviews and explanations with the partners, in putting his case into the hands of a firm of solicitors, who were known to be able and active men.

'I want,' he said, after putting the points as clearly as possible, 'I want the business pushed on with all despatch. You understand I claim the whole of my brother's estate as his sole heir.'

'Yes, the case, as you present it, has weak points, Mr. Hamblin.'

'You mean that my brother may have married. Rest assured, that he never did. Let them search every register in England. I *know* that he never married. I am as certain as that I am standing here.'

'But—the young lady—she must have had a mother.'

'Account for her mother as you will. My brother never married.'

Nothing short of the clearest documentary proof could shake Stephen's belief on this point. So far, he was perfectly and entirely sincere.

'There is another point. The Court, when we ask for Letters of Administration, may refuse to consider your brother's death as proved. Let us, however, make out the Affidavit.'

They went before the nearest commissioner, when Stephen took the necessary oath, and filled up the form.

'In the goods of Anthony Hamblin deceased,

'I, Stephen Hamblin, of Sandringham Chambers, Pall Mall, Gentleman, applying for Letters of Administration of the personal estate and effects of Anthony Hamblin, late of Great St. Simon Apostle, City of London, and Hooghly House, Clapham Common, deceased, do hereby make oath that the said deceased was drowned on the 3rd day of January, one thousand eight hundred and ——, in the River Serpentine, Hyde Park, and that the personal estate and effects of the said deceased, which he anyway died possessed of, or entitled to, and for or in respect of which Letters of Administration are to be granted, exclusive of what the said deceased may have been possessed of or entitled to as a Trustee for any other person or persons, and not beneficially including the leasehold estate or estates for years of the said deceased, whether absolute or determinable on a life or lives, and without deducting anything on account of the debts due and owing from the said deceased, are under the value of three hundred thousand pounds to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief.'

To which was appended the signatures of claimant and witnesses.

'This application,' said the lawyer, 'must be lodged on Thursday. Fortunately we are in time, and on Tuesday week we shall make our motion in Court. You will give us as many particulars as possible, Mr. Hamblin. We must make our case a strong one at the outset.'

It was then Tuesday. There was, therefore, a fortnight to wait. Stephen, tolerably ignorant of the English law, thought he had only to ask for the Letters of Administration, and then to step at once into possession. At the worst, he fancied the Court might possibly grant a short delay of two or three months, while the other side looked about for proofs of the marriage. He waited impatiently for a fortnight to pass.

The day came at last. He found himself in the Court.

Counsel for the complainant, in opening the case, said that, as had been stated in the affidavit, the deceased, Anthony Hamblin, had met with his death at the late deplorable accident on the 3rd of January last, when, by the breaking of the ice, fifty persons had been suddenly drowned. The case presented the peculiarity that the body was never, and had not up to the present moment been recovered. The Court might, therefore, be of opinion that the death was not proved. But the family,

in the hope that he had not been drowned, had taken every possible step, offering very large rewards, and advertising in the most likely manner to attract the attention of people. Mr. Hamblin was a man of strongly-marked individuality, easily recognisable; it was impossible that he should be still living unknown and unrecognised. He left his home on the morning of the 3rd of January: he told his servants that he should be home to dinner as usual: he was seen on the banks of the Serpentine half an hour or so before the occurrence of the accident: he was carrying his skates with him: he spoke to an officer of the Royal Humane Society, of which institution he was a liberal supporter: he announced his intention of going on the ice: he took off his heavy coat, and gave it to the man to keep for him: and he went away in the direction of a man who let chairs and adjusted skates for hire. Half an hour after his conversation with this officer the ice gave way, and two hundred people were suddenly submerged. A great many were drowned, and a great many bodies were subsequently recovered, but Mr. Anthony Hamblin's body, as already stated, was not found. In the evening the man carried the coat to his private residence, but he had not come home. There was no ground for any other supposition than that of death. He was a man universally respected and loved, a man of great wealth, a most successful merchant, a man of very steady and regular habits, no longer young; a man of happy disposition, with no enemies, no anxieties, no mental troubles: a man who enjoyed life, a man possessed of strong physique, free from ailments or sickness of any kind.

Stephen Hamblin, his client, the only brother of the deceased, on hearing the sad news, at once took up the position of guardian to his brother's child. With regard to this child, there had always been a mystery about her. Anthony Hamblin, until ten years before, was believed by all to be a bachelor. He suddenly, however, at that time, appeared at home with a little girl aged nine years, whom he introduced simply as his daughter. He explained that her mother had been dead for many years, and offered no other explanation on the subject. Nor was any other asked: and if his cousins had misgivings, these were easily appeased by consideration of the blameless life always led by the deceased.

On his death, however, the discovery that there was no will led to an attempt on the part of Stephen Hamblin to clear up the mystery connected with Miss Hamblin's birth. This investigation, commenced at first in the interests of the young lady, and after consultation with her, led Mr. Stephen Hamblin to surprising results. He found from the diaries and journals of the deceased, which, coupled with his own recollections of his brother's life, accounted fully for almost every hour of the

past thirty years, that there could have been no marriage at all. In that case, Stephen Hamblin was sole heir, and Miss Hamblin had no legal claim to any portion of the estate.

When these facts were fully established in his own mind, and not before, Stephen Hamblin sought his late brother's partners, and communicated them in a friendly spirit. He was not received, however, with the spirit that he expected. However, whether the petition was to be opposed or not, his client, in asking for Letters of Administration, desired it to be clearly understood that his intention, after acquiring the property to which he was entitled, was to recognise his brother's child, and to provide for her with liberality.

The counsel went on to describe the property in general terms. The real property consisted of a large house and grounds, known as Hooghly House, standing on Clapham Common, and a house standing in a small park in Sussex. There was also a considerable estate in house property, partly in the City of London, where the Hamblins had been merchants for two hundred years, and partly in the southern suburbs. Mr. Anthony Hamblin also, as chief partner in the firm, had a very large stake in the business. The personal property amounted to about two hundred and fifty thousand pounds in various stocks, securities, and investments. In addition, there was a valuable library, a collection of pictures, with furniture, objects of art, *bric-a-brac*, and so forth, the results of several generations of wealth. The whole would probably be sworn under three hundred thousand pounds.

The counsel for the petitioner then summed up his case. The proofs, which he held sufficient to the mind of any unprejudiced person, that there never had been any marriage, were found in the very careful and minute diaries kept by Anthony Hamblin, in which every detail of expense, occupation, employment and engagement was scrupulously entered. These not only contained no mention of any marriage, but left no room for any marriage. Although his death had been announced in every paper, and, by reason of the accident which caused it, had obtained the widest publicity, no one had as yet stepped forward to claim relationship with the young lady on her mother's side. The great Family Bible, in which were entries of the births and deaths of six generations of Hamblins, which formed, in fact, a complete genealogical table of the family, contained no entry of the marriage of Anthony or the birth of his daughter Alison. This omission was very extraordinary.

There were a few witnesses to call. The first was the man Harris, whose evidence was simple and straightforward. He believed Mr. Hamblin was drowned with the rest. He could not see how anyone could think otherwise. The body had

never been found. It might have been among the rest, but he did not think that likely. There were two or three bodies unidentified, but their clothes had been kept.

Then the footman, Charles, deposed that his master had told him in the morning, before he went out, that he should be at home as usual.

Augustus Hamblin testified to the regular habits and freedom from care of his late cousin. He, too, expressed his conviction that Anthony Hamblin had been drowned.

The Court did not want to hear any more evidence on the subject. The Court would pass on to consider the nature of the claim set up by Mr. Stephen Hamblin.

Then the counsel for the other side was able to begin.

He said that up to a certain point he was prepared to acknowledge all the statements made by his learned brother. There was no will to be found; most likely none had been executed. There was no mention anywhere of a marriage. There was not any entry of his own marriage or the birth of his daughter in the Family Bible. All this was quite true. As regarded the disinterested action of Mr. Stephen Hamblin, in seeking to prove himself the heir to so large a property, he was only desirous to state that Mr. Stephen Hamblin had proved his liberal intentions by offering this young lady, brought up to regard herself as the heiress of a very large fortune, a hundred pounds a year. But as regards the silence, he would submit that the question was altogether begged by his learned brother. There was one point quite undisputed by all: Miss Hamblin was the undoubted daughter of Anthony Hamblin. Not only did she possess certain strongly marked peculiarities common to all the Hamblins, but she was most curiously and remarkably like her grandmother, Mr. Hamblin's mother, who had been a Spanish lady. Very well, then. Here was a daughter, acknowledged as such by all; here was an intentional and marked omission of all mention of the child's mother in diaries and family records. What were they to infer? Two things were possible. The one view which his learned brother had adopted, and one which, he would submit to the Court, was the more probable because the more honourable. It was this: The late Mr. Anthony Hamblin had been from boyhood of singular purity of life. Few men could look back upon a course so blameless, so free from reproach, as his. It was a life open to the eyes of all. There was nothing to conceal, nothing to be ashamed of. Above all, there could be no skeleton in the cupboard. His friends believed, one and all, implicitly in the purity and nobility of the life which had been so suddenly and fearfully taken from their midst. They believed that Anthony Hamblin was married. They were confident that if investigation were

made, proofs would be found. They put forward the daughter, Alison Hamblin, as the heiress, and they asked that time should be allowed to enable them to make the research.

The Judge said that this was a case in which he was not called upon to grant time for the purpose asked: viz., to prove the marriage. It did appear remarkable, and in some men it would be suspicious, that no mention had been made at all of the young lady's mother. On the other hand, the supposed deceased gentleman had evidently borne the highest character. Why, then, had he thought proper to leave unexplained the circumstance of his daughter's birth? Meantime, however, he was not satisfied with the proof of the death of Anthony Hamblin. He should require further proof.

Stephen's counsel asked how long a period would satisfy his lordship.

The Court replied that he could not tie himself down to any time; there had been cases in which men had been missed for years and had returned; cases in which men had gone to sea, run away from debts or imagined annoyance, taken assumed names. There were many possible reasons for hiding. No man's life was wholly known: no man's sanity could be altogether relied on. He would adjourn the case; the parties could come before him at any time should they get additional or conclusive evidence. If no more was found, he would hear them again in a twelvemonth, or perhaps two years. The estate could be in the meantime administered by Mr. Anthony Hamblin's solicitors, the houses and gardens kept up as before, and a sufficient sum allotted for the young lady. And he would advise that the most diligent search should be made by both sides, if they could act in concert, for the discovery of the name and connections of the missing mother.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW ALISON TOOK IT.

To gain time is generally the next best thing to gaining the victory. Alison had gained time. Gilbert threw himself into a hansom, and carried the good news faster than any that was ever brought into Ghent, to the house on Clapham Common.

'So far,' he said, 'we have been successful. Unless anything new turns up, Letters of Administration will not be granted for a year at least. During that time, we shall have made out our own case. Courage, Alison!'

This was one of Alison's bad days. She had lost the old confident bearing, the insolence which sits so well on happy youth: she was dejected; the ready smile was gone; her lips were set and her eyes were hard. She was of those who have a quarrel with fate. It is not unusual: sooner or later we all mistrust the unaccountable rulings of destiny, but it is sad when the quarrel begins so early in life.

'Thank you, Gilbert,' she said, when he had delivered himself of his message and his prophecy of encouragement. 'Thank you, Gilbert. You are all very kind about me. A year to wait, you say? Then I shall be of age, and I shall want no more guardians. Then I shall go to my uncle—no, I will write to him, because I can never see him again—and say, "If it is only the money you want, take it, and leave my father's memory in peace." I suppose he will do that; anything is better than this dragging of his dear name before the courts.'

'The application will be reported in the papers,' said Gilbert. 'A few people who know the name will read it: your own cousins will read it, no one else.'

Gilbert reckoned without the special London correspondent who got hold of the story and retailed it, with additions of his own, for the benefit of the country papers. In fact, all England was interested in the destination of this vast fortune. Who would not be interested in the disposal of more than a quarter of a million of money? The mere mention of such a sum stimulates the imagination. What years of careful thought—what generations of success—what abilities—what prudence—what swiftness of vision, clearness of brain, sacrifice of present pleasure, are represented by so gigantic a pile! The vastness of the sum bewilders the poor wretch whose only hope is to be a little 'before' the world, so that should that calamity, known as 'anything,' happen, his widow and the children may be hedged round by the resource of a few hundreds. So that the writers of the 'London letter,' most of whom belong to the order of those who save little and spend little when they would gladly save much and spend more, seized upon the story and dressed it up. Happy Stephen! Unhappy Alison! Those who had rich relatives reflected with sorrow that there could never be any doubt about their marriage; those who had none built castles in the air, and speculated on the chance of unexpected legacies. Of all dreams which flesh is heir to, that of unexpected fortune is, I believe, the commonest. It is so much more pleasant to dream than to work; it is so much more delightful to look forward to an old age of comfort and ease, than to one of hard work and collar to the end. I once knew an old gentleman, industrious, religious, moral to the highest point, an excellent father, a model husband, whose whole life proclaimed

to the world his acquiescence with the Church Catechism, and the state of life to which he was born. After his death it was discovered that for thirty years he had annually purchased a ticket in the Austrian lottery. He had no rich relations; he could not expect an accession of fortune from any source whatever, yet he dreamed of wealth and bought his ticket every year.

'You will not be allowed to throw away your fortune, Alison,' Gilbert went on. 'You owe it to yourself, to your father, to fight the battle out. But courage! Long before a year we shall have managed to get at the truth. Why, do you think that marriages are not registered, and that registers are not kept? If Stephen Hamblin has any reason to wish that the truth should not be discovered, I have every reason to make me work at its recovery. My dear,'—he took her unresisting hand—'every hope of my life is bound up with it. It *shall* be found. Consider, Alison, you must have had a mother somewhere. You must have been born somewhere, registered somewhere, christened somewhere. We know the date of your birth, that is something.'

'Yes,' said Alison, trying to respond to her lover's eagerness, 'unless Mrs. Duncombe was wrong, I was born twenty years ago, on the fifth day of June. There are two facts for you. Can you make anything out of them?'

'By themselves, very little. But I have thought how to use them. With the aid of the registers, I can make everything out of them. Listen, Alison: we shall put our advertisements in the papers, we invite everybody—clergymen, and parish clerks, and country doctors—to look for a certain register of birth on such a day. When I have got that register, it will be time to consider what next. Perhaps your father married under an assumed name. We may, by the help of the register, get hold of that name. It will lead us to further discoveries. Why, those two facts, the year and the day, may prove invaluable. I think we may safely assume that the marriage took place in the South of England, probably in the neighbourhood of London, because the diaries show clearly—and Mr. Augustus Hamblin distinctly recollects, that in the year of your birth, and the two years before that, your father was never far away from London. Thus, in the summer of your birth he went to Bournemouth by himself, and remained there three weeks—very likely on business connected with yourself. The year before that he took a holiday early in the summer with his brother Stephen, and went fishing. For some weeks he wrote from Newbury. The year before that, he spent the whole summer with his mother, who was ill at the time, at Brighton. So you see, as Stephen Hamblin very clearly saw, there is no room in the page, so to

speak, for him to have been married anywhere far away from London.'

Alison sighed.

'You come to me, Gilbert, and you raise hopes in my mind which make me for the moment happy. Oh, if I could but clear my father's name! It is so dreadful to think that all the world is jeering and making merry over the accusation brought by his own brother—my dear father, so good, so kind, so noble! Why, I should have thought there was not a single creature of all who knew him in all the world, too low and degraded to acknowledge his goodness. It made other people good, while he lived, only to be with him and near him. It made me good, then.'

'You are always good, Alison.'

She shook her head sadly.

'I am always full of regrets, of wicked thoughts, Gilbert. I used to be good, when you fell in love with me. That was the reason, I suppose.'

She would have no recognition of an engagement, and yet she spoke to her lover frankly. There was no doubt, at all events, in her own mind. Gilbert loved her. If she could, she would marry him. She trusted and she distrusted with the same entire abandonment. To trust in full, to doubt and distrust in full, came from her Spanish blood. She was like the Señora, her grandmother, in mind as well as in face.

'Do you mean that I fell in love with you because you were good?' asked Gilbert, laughing. 'No, it was not. I do not think that a man asks himself when he falls in love, whether the girl is very good; she seems good to her lover; he believes in her goodness; if he did not, he would persuade himself that he could make her good. I suppose that after marriage husbands like their wives to be good-tempered, at least. Before, it does not matter so much.'

'It is wonderful,' said Alison, 'how men ever fall in love with girls at all.'

'Do not disparage your sex,' said Gilbert.

'Oh! we are weak. We can do nothing by ourselves; we take our ideas from men; we look to men for our religion, our manners, our thoughts. And yet men fall down at a woman's feet and worship her. As for me, there has been nothing good in me at all since the day when my uncle told me—what he was pleased to call the truth. I think there will never any more be anything good in me at all. I am devoured by evil passions, and hatreds, and wicked thoughts. I find it difficult, sometimes, to believe in my father. Yet, if I cannot believe in him, there is nothing. And I think of my uncle with a loathing which makes me sick.'

'Faith, Alison! Have faith.'

'Ah! Gilbert, so long as you are here I find it easy to have faith. I feel strong and hopeful then. Your brave words encourage me. When you are gone I begin to doubt again, and if you are long away I begin to despair.'

'Poor child! I must come oftener to see you.'

'I do not know whether it is worse to be in the house or to be out of it. At home my aunt sits and watches me all day long, asking every half-hour if I feel better; and it seems as if I were having an operation performed, and they were watching curiously to see how I was bearing it. To be sure, the suspense is worse than the operation. Even the boy troubles me with his sympathy, his eagerness to do everything he can think of for me—he who was formerly so careless and selfish—and his delight in assuring me, whenever he can find an opportunity, of his protection. You see, the very things one used to laugh at and enjoy are become fresh causes of trouble to me. Poor Nicolas! He means so well, too. But that shows how wrong-headed these things have made me. If I go out, perhaps it is worse, because then I think as I go along that everybody is saying, "There goes Miss Hamblin, as she calls herself, though she has no real right to bear the name." Or else I hear them whisper as I pass—this jealousy of mine makes me hear the lowest whisper—"That is Miss Hamblin, who was once so proud, and thought herself so rich, and held up her head so high above all the rest of us. Now she has been found out, and she is going to be turned into the street, without a penny to call her own, and not even a name to her back. What a come-down!" Even in church I am not free, but I think I feel the people's eyes on me when they ought to be on their books or on the clergyman in the pulpit. They are saying, "That is Miss Hamblin; she was proud enough a year ago; she is humbled now, poor girl! She has no longer got anything to be proud of." So, everywhere and all day long, I am watched, and mocked, and scorned.'

Gilbert caught her hand, and kissed the unresisting fingers a hundred times.

'No, child, no! There is no scorning of you. The world is better hearted than you think. There can be nothing but pity and respect for you.'

'I know, I know,' she replied, with tears in her eyes. 'But if the evil thoughts are in your own mind you think they are in other people's, and my mind is full of mockery and scorn. Everything mocks at me: this garden, the very flowers, the house, even the furniture. They all have faces, and they all laugh and flout at me, because I pretended to be the heiress, who am nothing at all but a nameless girl. They know me for an impostor.'

What could Gilbert say in comfort? He muttered some commonplace. You might as well try to persuade a man with a gaping sword wound that he is not hurt. The girl wandered restlessly to and fro upon the lawn. It was with her as she told her lover. She was haunted day and night by two ghosts, who never left her. One of them was the Shade of her former happiness, the other was the Shade of her present low estate. One was the ghost of a maiden, proud, defiant, self-reliant, looking out upon the future with the confidence of one for whom Fortune has nothing in store but her choicest gifts. She was dressed in silks and satins, this young princess; she rode a stately horse; at her feet the young men fell down, with adoring eyes, and knelt; as she passed, flowers grew up beside the way; only to look at her, she felt as she gazed upon this ghost, warmed the heart; the children ran after her, and shouted and laughed; the poor came out of their cottages and blessed her. She was like a benevolent fairy, who is not an old woman at all, but young and beautiful as the day, and not capricious or uncertain, but always faithful, loyal, and true. And she was full of the most tender and precious Christian thoughts, this shadow. It seemed as if the things against which she prayed, just because it was her duty as a Christian, and enjoined by the Church—the evils of hatred, wrath, malice, and so forth—had no more to do with her than the gross impossibilities of drunkenness and the like. The contemplation of so much religion, pure and undefiled, in this perfection of a ghost filled Alison's heart with bitterness.

As for the other Shade, it presented a sad contrast. For this ghost was that of a mere beggar-girl. She went barefoot, and was clothed in nothing but old rags and duds, and odds and ends. She shook her head, and cried, with shame and rage, at her own misery. Some moaned, and wept, and lamented, because she had nothing at all of her own. The poorest gipsy girl had something, but she had nothing. The pitiless, unsympathising children hooted at her as she went; the poor people came out of their cottages and jeered her, because she was so very poor and ragged; the wayfarers flouted her, because she was so very lonely and miserable. Every mocking gibe was like a knife that went straight to her heart. And that was not the worst of it; for, this wretched, ragged girl, who was so poor in worldly goods, was stripped of all religion as well. She was full of hatred and wrath; she thought well of none; she suspected all; she was bitter and envious. In her heart there were none of the sweet blossoms of faith, hope, and charity, which flourish so well in the congenial soil of the heart of a happy English girl. Alison looked on this shadow with shuddering and loathing, as she looked on the other with envy and jealousy.

Such as they were, they remained by her side, and never left her.

'Courage, Alison!' said Gilbert. He had spoken to her half a dozen times, but she returned no answer, being occupied with these phantoms. 'Courage, Alison! Think of brighter things.'

'There are no brighter things,' she cried bitterly. 'There is nothing but misery and shame. Oh, Gilbert!' breaking into a passionate gesture, 'why trouble any more about me? Let me go away and be forgotten. Let them do what they like with the money; if you search any further you may find out some secret more shameful than any that has been suspected—if that is possible; you may find out why my father hid away, and would tell to no one the story of my birth.'

She broke from him and ran, hiding her face with a gesture of shame, into the house.

Gilbert remained in the garden. A quarter of an hour later she returned, the fit of passion over, calm and cold.

'Forgive me,' she said, holding out her hand; 'I do not often give way. To-day, the thought of my case being pleaded in open court, my name being bandied about among all those people, maddened me. I will try to bear it. But Gilbert, be wise; do not waste your precious time upon me. I am content to let all go, so that there be no further questioning.'

'That is not the faith we want to see in you,' said Gilbert. 'Why, that would be treachery to the very name you want to see unsullied. Have confidence, dear Alison! we will carry the matter through, and we shall not fail to see the name of Anthony Hamblin pass through the ordeal triumphantly. Only have faith.'

'I wish I could,' she murmured.

Here they were joined by Alderney Codd. He had come down by the humbler conveyance—the omnibus. His thin face was wreathed with smiles.

'You have heard the news, Alison?' he began. 'Of course you have—Gilbert has told you. Well, so far, we have every reason to be satisfied. Time—time: that is what we want.'

'You see, Alison,' said Gilbert, 'we are all agreed. With a little time we shall, we must succeed.'

'Time to prove things,' Alderney added, 'that is all; to prove things which we know already. We know them, I say, all but the names. God bless my soul! It is a matter of faith.'

'Thank you, Cousin Alderney,' said Alison; 'I am rich in friends, if in nothing else.'

'Why,' said Alderney, planting himself firmly, 'whenever I put on that coat which your poor father lent me, and which I have retained out of respect to his memory, I feel a glow of

gratitude, more warming than a pint of port. Of course I am ready to work for you. Outside the court'—he laughed at the recollection—'I met Stephen himself, looking his very blackest. It went to my heart to treat him so—my cousin and my oldest friend. But I thought of Anthony, and I cut him dead. Jack Baker was with him. Ah! they've got my prospectus of the Great Glass Spoon Company. After thirty years' friendship, after so many good times as we have had together, it seemed hard; and to lose the Great Glass Spoon Company as well. But gratitude, Alison, gratitude stood between us. Gratitude said, "You cannot know any longer the man who is trying to rob your benefactor's orphan."'

'But,' said Alison, 'can you not even know my uncle Stephen? must you break altogether with him?'

'I must,' said Alderney, gloomily. 'I cannot serve two interests. I cast in my lot, Alison, with yours.'

I think I have omitted to state that Alderney had been requested by the partners to take the position of guardian, or vice-guardian. He was, in fact, promoted to that post of dignity, *vice* Stephen Hamblin, cashiered, on the strength of which he gave himself airs of importance in the Birch-Tree Tavern. He slept at the house: in the morning, such was his zeal, he rose at six, breakfasted early, and set off on his quest among the London parish registries, both official and ecclesiastical. He carried a big pocket-book with a pencil in readiness to make entries, should any bearing on the subject be found. But for some time nothing at all was discovered in London churches.

He returned to Clapham about half-past six or seven, and dined with the ladies. He cheered the banquet by anecdotes of his past experiences, revealed a new world—a series of new worlds, to Alison, by describing how he had rowed, played cricket, sung songs at supper, and otherwise distinguished himself at Cambridge; how, with Stephen, he once stayed for six months in the Quartier Latin of Paris: how he had sojourned, by himself, among the students of Heidelberg: how he had lost his little fortune and mortgaged half his little income to pay off his creditors, and how he had become a person of great distinction in the world of finance.

It was all wonderful: the contemplation, at second-hand, of life under so many new aspects distracted Alison, and turned her thoughts from her present anxieties. Alderney, too, had a powerful imagination; his stories were touched with that light which is neither of heaven nor of earth, of unreality desirable and beautiful, which only a man with some touch of genius knows how to infuse: and he understood how to place himself as the central figure in the group.

About one or two things she was uncertain. It was not clear

when her cousin could find the time to become the profound scholar which he loved to represent himself; nor was it quite apparent to her that the real objects and aims of the Universities of Cambridge, Heidelberg, and Paris were best arrived at by such a life as he described as common among the students. Finally, she could not understand that it was altogether right to promote the establishment of companies whose only object seemed to be to enable their founders to sell out when the shares were high, and then to collapse. But Alderney assured her that she could not comprehend financial morality. It resembled, he said, diplomacy; everyone knew that if diplomacy were to be stripped of brag, bounce, lies, and pretence, the trade of diplomatists would be gone, and we might transact the affairs of nations by means of guileless girls or conscientious curates.

As for Nicolas, he utilised the presence of so great a scholar for his own purposes: he read novels, in fact, while Alderney Codd wrote his exercises for him.

'Your Latin subjunctive moods,' said the boy, 'are sound; but your French past participles are shaky. If you go on living here till the end of the half, I shall have a shy at the Latin verse prize. Now then—Exercise forty-three. On the oblique narrative. Here's Balbus again—no getting rid of that chap anyhow.'

CHAPTER XX.

HOW YOUNG NICK SPENT HIS HALF-HOLIDAY.

On a warm and pleasant morning in May, about a week after the Hamblin case was heard in Court, the boys of the Clapham Grammar School came flocking from the class-rooms as the clock struck twelve. After the nature of boys they ran, jumped, shouted, and laughed. One among them all neither ran, nor jumped, nor shouted. He only walked. And he was a boy with white hair and pink eyes. He dug his hands into his pockets, wore his hat a little tilted over his forehead, which conveys the idea of a thoughtful nature, and calmly surveyed the mob of contemporaries with the eye of a philosopher.

Young Nick, in fact, was not a clubbable boy. He went his own way. Nobody ever saw him in a cricket-field, nor was he ever in the 'worry' of a foot-ball match. If he saw a game of cricket going on upon Clapham Common, he gave the players a wide berth; the Common was broad enough for him and them. If he saw the foot-ball come bounding over the rough

surface in his direction, he retired, laterally, so as to avoid the crowd which came after it. The common gauds which delight boyhood gave no joy to Nicolas. The silver cups, offered for competition at athletics, he valued at their weight in silver, and no more. This was not much, and so he rarely entered his own name in any trial of skill, strength, or speed. Yet, after the sports were over, he might have been observed, had he been watched, going through every one of the events by himself, one after the other, and making careful comparisons of his own results with those obtained by the winners. If he held aloof from his schoolfellows out of hours, in school he was still more self-contained. Nothing moved him, no spirit of emulation possessed him; he never cared to be high in his form, nor was he depressed if his place was low. He was absolutely unmoved by any of the exhortations, incitements, or satiric remarks of his masters. He neither took nor pretended to take the smallest interest in the routine school-work, and he valued a prize, as he valued a silver-cup, at exactly the sum it cost at the bookseller's.

'Greek!' he would say contemptuously. 'What is the use of Greek in the City? Who wants Greek in the army? Greek is invented for schoolmasters to pretend to be able to read it. Catch them reading Greek when no one's looking, and for their own pleasure. Yah! They *can't* do it. Latin again. Do the partners in the great City Houses write Latin verses? Do they grind out exercises in the subjunctive mood? Do they make their clerks say the irregular verbs and the rules of syntax every morning? Gammon!'

Euclid was another branch of education for which he entertained the most profound contempt, holding that the City required no geometry of a young man. But arithmetic, writing, drawing, French, German, and geography, were subjects which he plainly saw to have a solid commercial value, and he worked at them with zeal and vigour; so much so, indeed, that on more than one occasion he found himself presented with a prize for proficiency in these branches.

There were other things, not generally taught in schools, at which this remarkable youth worked hard, in those hours when his comrades were running wild about the Common. He had conceived the very just idea that deportment, manners, ease in society, and a good tone, were of more use to a young man in the City than anywhere else. Accordingly, he had begged Alison to consider him as her pupil, and in these departments he became voluntarily subject to her as his mistress. He could be, and frequently was, as we have already seen, as vulgar a boy as ever walked. Yet the lessons had their effect, and the

boy's slang was only affected, just as other boys' fine manners are put on for the occasion.

He was a handy boy, too, and practised small arts. He had a lathe with which he could make all sorts of things; and he could carve in wood; and he could execute fret-work; and he could take a watch to pieces, and once nearly succeeded in putting it together again. And he worked steadily at shorthand, always with a view of becoming more useful in the City. In short, he intended to present himself, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, as an accomplished young clerk, ready for any kind of work—the perfect clerk, whose undoubted destiny is a partnership. I believe it was Socrates who first explained how useful and excellent a thing it is that man should resolve on perfection in his own line, so that if he be a carpenter he will be the best possible carpenter, and if a statesman the best possible statesman, and so forth. It is by such men that success is achieved: such a carpenter, Socrates pointed out, wins the wreath of carpentering, which is made of the shavings.

In addition to these virtues of resolution and industry, young Nick possessed that of silence; no one ever suspected him of serious intentions, except Alison, who watched him, gave him advice, and to whom he confided in a way his projects and his scheme for the conduct of life.

This reduction of education to its practical uses was not without effect upon the boys with whom young Nick worked. They were all boys connected with the City; they all—except one every year, who took the annual scholarship and went up to Oxford or Cambridge, looked to the City as the scene of their future labours and triumphs: they were all taught at home to regard 'business' as the noblest profession, because it brings in most money: the clever boy who carried off the prizes became captain of the school, went up to Cambridge and distinguished himself, was regarded with a sort of pity, because the City would be closed to him. He might take a good degree: he might achieve greatness as a preacher or a lawyer or a writer; but, poor beggar! he would never have any money.

So that young Nick's teaching fell upon rich soil, and took root and flourished. Yet, as always happens, there were none, except himself, who advanced beyond the grumbling stage, and struck out a practical line for himself.

A boy so singular in appearance, so original in his manner of regarding life and its duties, so self-contained, and with that ingeniously mischievous leaning to which attention has been already drawn, was, of course, a noticeable feature in the school. At prize-giving days it pleased the boy to overhear other boys whispering to their sisters, 'That's young Nick: there he is, with the white hair.'

On this particular morning he first looked up into the sky and observed that the day was bright; then he felt in his pocket and found that the eighteenpence which constituted all his wealth was safe in the corner, in three sixpences. Then he reflected gravely:

'I did tell the old lady that I might have business at Anthony Hamblin and Company's. She won't mind if I don't go home for dinner, and it's only cold roast beef, and eighteenpence will get me a good deal better dinner than cold roast beef. Then where am I to get the next eighteenpence? Uncle Anthony, we *all* miss you. Eighteenpence—well, I can walk in, and if the money runs to it, I can get back on a bus.'

For an active boy of thirteen, a walk from Clapham to London Bridge is not far, and it is full of interest. First the way lies along a broad and open road, with substantial villas on either side as old as the great houses in the gardens round the Common; there is a nonconformist church with pillars and pediment almost as magnificent as anything that Athens could ever show; there is the Swan, a roadside public-house with its water-trough in front, and always carts of hay standing about, thirsty horses drinking, drivers talking and passing round the frequent pewter, stable-boys dawdling about, so that the place presents somewhat of the rusticity which it boasted fifty years ago when first it was founded. Presently you pass what was once the village of Stockwell, where there was a famous, but not at all a fearful, ghost. Then begin shops. Then another stretch of road with terraces, but no longer great gardens, and some of the terraces, are dingy; then more shops; then Kennington Church, ugly, and yet venerable by reason of its vast churchyard, where lie the bones of so many thousand citizens. To young Nick, the church was a sort of half-way house. Besides, there was a clock in the tower. Beyond the church is the park, as large as my lady's pocket-handkerchief, ornamented with a lodge which does infinite credit to its architect—the late Prince Consort.

After the park, the Horns Tavern, regarded by boys from Clapham as the real frontier-post of Town, and then shops, more shops, and yet more shops.

'Why,' asked young Nick, 'don't they knock them all into one mighty great shop, and then take turns to keep it, so that they would have six days' holiday out of the seven, at least?'

The question was asked some little time ago, but no practical answer has yet been given, and I think there are still about as many shops as ever.

Arrived at the Horns, young Nick trudged on with lighter step. He was about to enter the golden ground—Tom Tidler's ground, where one day he, too, would be enabled to stoop and gather the yellow nuggets. His white hair white eyebrows, and

pink complexion made the people turn and stare at him. That he did not mind. It was a kind of tribute to his greatness; personal merit, he argued to himself, made him an Albino. He only held his head higher, and walked with more assurance. The meanness of the shops in Newington Causeway affected him painfully. Trade ought to be majestic, he thought. Presently the sight of an immense block of buildings overshadowing the Tabernacle cheered him. It was consecrated to the cordwaining mystery. 'There is Money,' said young Nick, 'in Boots.'

Presently he came to London Bridge. Here he halted, to lean over the low parapet, and gaze down the river upon the forest of masts in the Pool, the steamers threading their way up and down the tortuous highway of the river, which was by no means silent, but exasperatingly noisy, with the bells, the whistles, the steam-escapes of the boats, and the oaths of the long-shore men, who, all of them three-fourths drunk, were taking the empty ships down the river, from London Port to Leith.

'They bring their cargoes,' said young Nick, thoughtfully, 'to the Docks. There is indigo, and cochineal, and dates, and figs, and silk, and tea, and coffee, and corn, and brandy, and palm-butter, and all sorts, such as ostrich feathers, and elephants' tusks, and porpoise skins, and bacon, and cheese, and apples. They come from all the corners of the world. They unload at the Docks; and then we, the merchants of London, begin to make our money out of the cargoes. Aha! That is where the fun begins. The niggers toil and moil, growing the stuff, and weeding it, and picking it, getting horribly licked with rattan-canes all the while—ho! ho! then the sailors stow it away, and bring it home, going up aloft in all weathers, tumbling overboard, and getting drowned—ha! ha! then the dock-labourers, at eightcenpence a day—ha! ha! ho! ho!—put it ashore in the docks; and then our turn comes. What a beautiful thing it is to be a British merchant, and in the City of London! We sit at our ease before our desks; our travellers go about for us among the retail traders, getting orders; the clerks receive them; we have got just nothing to do, except to divide the profits. Oh, what a pity, what a thousand pities, that poor Uncle Anthony got drowned before I was old enough to go into the House!'

Perhaps some incident in morning school had irritated him, for he went on:

'Bah! As if the subjunctive mood would ever help a man to a partnership! Balbus feared that it was all up with the army, did he? Then what a white-livered, cowardly sneak Balbus must have been! I hope he was with the army, and it was all up with *him!* But one never knows what became of Balbus, because he always turns up again, and always pretending to

smile, and always funking something. Certainly Balbus must have been a great humbug, and I am quite sure that he got into such an Almighty Funk at last, that he forgot all about his tenses and moods, mixed up the subjunctive and the indicative, and used the imperfect for the present.'

More he would have meditated, but that he looked round and perceived that he was the object of earnest contemplation on the part of an old lady, apparently of failing eyesight, because she held a pair of glasses close to her eyes. She was gazing on his white hair, and certainly either did not see, or could not understand the jacket. And she thought he was meditating suicide.

'Aged man!' she murmured, in impassioned accents, 'do not, do not, I entreat you, destroy your life!'

'O Lord!' cried young Nick, 'here's a precious game!'

He was in one of those embrasures, retreats, upon London Bridge, where one can sit breezily and contemplate the passing crowd, or the argosies of the Port.

'Here's a game!' he cried. Regardless of the small crowd which gathered round in a moment, he amazed the poor old lady, who was feeling in her bag for a tract, by executing before her a *pas seul*, a reminiscence of a hornpipe, with an agility and grace surprising in one so old. While she was still staring aghast, he had finished, and descending from the little semicircle, he squared his elbows and pushed through the mob which had gathered round, with a good-humoured 'Now then, can't you let a man pass?'

It will be seen that young Nick already understood the true art of making points. You must be unexpected, brisk, confident, and brief. Before the old lady had half realised that the snowy locks belonged to a boy and not an old man at all, and before the crowd had half understood the full humour of the situation, which they would take home and gradually evolve, the hero of it was gone, vanished in the crowd, never more to be seen by the greater part.

The boy, greatly rejoicing at the discomfiture of the old lady, proceeded on his walk. He first repaired to the central office at Great St. Simon Apostle. He knew all the clerks in the place, and they all knew that his first ambition was to have a desk among them. His last ambition, Nick kept to himself. He had purposed, as part of to-day's amusement, dining in company with some of his friends among the junior clerks. Everybody in the house, indeed, regarded the boy as one of themselves. For him it was splendid to sit among the diners at Crosby Hall, to call grandly for what he chose from the list, to ask for a half-pint of old and bitter, mixed, boiled beef, 'underdone, Lizzie, and not too much fat' with carrots, potatoes, and new bread; to have the dinne served up in hot plates, each with its tin cover,

brought in a delightful pile ; to inquire tenderly, just like a regular clerk, after Lizzie's health and spirits that morning, and to congratulate the young lady on her looks ; to consider the question of college-pudding or cheese, and to feel that the day must be marked by the exhibition of the former ; to ask for the bill, to dally with the half-pint as if it were a decanter of sherry, and as if you were not pressed for time, oh dear no, not at all, and could get back to the office whenever you felt so disposed ; to pay your money, exchanging the compliments of the season with the young lady (of more severe aspect) who takes the money at the door ; help yourself to a tooth-pick, and stroll with dignity down the street in the direction of the workshop, quickening gradually as you approached the portals, and entering briskly and with the appearance of zeal. All this was a very delightful change after the irresponsible meals at home. It made young Nick feel as if he were already a clerk in the office, already had a desk of his own, already had placed his foot on the lowest rung of the ladder up which he meant to climb until he stood in the dizziest heights with Augustus the Great and William the Silent. That, however, was in the far distance. For the present he envied every one in the Firm, from the office-boy at five shillings a week, to the senior clerks and managers of departments.

To-day, to the boy's disappointment, it was already half-past one when he got to Great St. Simon Apostle, and the young clerks, his friends, were dispersed, multivious, in quest of food.

So he resolved to dine by himself, and rambled about the office, from one room to another, trying the stools, and wondering which were the most comfortable desks. When he had finished a hasty inspection of the clerks' room, he made his way upstairs. There were the rooms of the senior clerks and of the partners. 'Mr. Augustus Hamblin,' on one door : 'Mr. William Hamblin,' on another door : and alas ! on another the name of Mr. Anthony Hamblin.

Young Nick sorrowfully turned the handle, and peeped in. No one was there, and he entered the room, softly closing the door behind him. Everything was just as Anthony had left it, except that the safe stood open, with all the papers taken out. The chair before the table ; the table itself ; an office-coat hanging behind the door ; the cupboard where the sherry and biscuits were kept, with a box or two of cigars ; the big screen in the corner ; the grimy windows ; the wax candles ; the great plated inkstand ; the massive pad of blotting-paper—all reminded the boy of his uncle.

'Oh ! Uncle Anthony,' he said, for the second time that day, sitting in the dead man's chair, 'what a pity, what a thousand pities, that you were drowned before I was old enough to come

into the House! But I will get in somehow; and, before all is done, I will sit in this chair as a partner. See if I don't!'

There was something uncanny about this empty room, full of associations: and the boy quickly left it, shutting the door very softly behind him. He did not dare to visit the partners' rooms, nor those of the chief clerks; and, after a little exchange of *facetiæ* with the porters, he left the house, and turned his face in a south-easterly direction, which led him, by way of Gracechurch Street and Eastcheap, to Tower Hill. He had forgotten that he was hungry, and was making in the direction of the place he loved next best to Great St. Simon the Apostle, the Docks.

Tower Hill always pleased him mightily. There are great warehouses there, with cranes, waggons, and other signs of business; there is the Mint, always engaged in manufacturing sovereigns for the reward of successful merchants; there is the Trinity House, which keeps an ever-watchful eye over the safety of the mercantile marine. There are, as many people know, other associations connected with Tower Hill. Young Nick had read about some of these, or, rather, had learned about them in history lessons; but they did not stick, any more than the Latin subjunctive. He had no leanings towards historical associations. He was not, like some among us, haunted by the ghost of the Past. Not at all. He looked at the White Tower, on which the sun was shining splendidly, as it has shone for eight hundred years, and murmured, 'What a beautiful place for the head offices of the House! and plenty of room all about for our own warehouses.' But then, he would have gazed upon the walls of the Holy City itself without emotion.

He went on, turning to the right, and came upon the usual little crowd of merchant sailors, standing about on the pavement opposite the Board of Trade Office, waiting to be hired. They are a curious body of men, these mercantile Jacks. They lack the independence and careless ease of their brethren of the Royal Navy. They are not clean like them; nor do they take a pride in the smartness of their dress; nor are they conspicuous for the appearance of physical activity. They are not spry; they have no joviality; their cheeks are mostly bloated with bad liquor; their eyes are dull; their gait is heavy; their attire is a mixture of sea-going and shore-going togs; their hands are in their pockets; they look ashamed of themselves. They seem to say, 'Behold us, you who have neglected us, and left us to be the prey of greedy shipowners and piratical crimps. See what we are, the descendants of the gallant heroes who sailed Westward-Ho! with Raleigh, and Drake, and Hawkins. Around us are the land-sharks who plunder us, the black-eyed sirens—most all of them have one black eye at least—who

destroy us, the office where we sign articles which enslave us. Beyond us are the craft which take us to our doom—ill-found, ill-rigged, the cheating venture of a cheating shipper. On board them we are fed with rancid pork and weevily biscuit. There are not enough of us to navigate her even in smooth seas. We are knocked down by mate or skipper with anything handy, a rope's end or a marline-spike. On board there is no safety, nor respite of work, nor any comfortable thing at all. On shore there is the madness of rioting and drink, which is the only joy we know. We are for ever on the frying-pan or in the fire. Your navy-men you watch over. For them you have chaplains, doctors, schools, homes, societies, and pensions. You forbid their officers to ill-treat them ; you provide them with good and abundant food ; you train them, educate them, and you find your ships well. But for us you do nothing ; and we all reel, blind, and deaf, and careless, and uncared for, into the abyss.'

They did not speak so, however, to young Nick, who regarded them with enthusiasm.

'Splendid fellows!' he said. '*They* don't mind how much hard work they do. They don't mind how bad the weather is, nor how cold. They *like* to feel that they are bringing money—heaps of money—home to the partners of the great City firms, making them richer every day. I couldn't feel like that, myself. But then I'm not a sailor.

Then he came to the gates of St. Katharine's Docks.

Cerberus, in shape of three policemen, stands at those gates : young Nick, whom the three knew perfectly well, and all about him, always made a point at these gates of going through a little comedy of intrigue. He pulled a leather book from his jacket pocket, extracted, standing without the gates, a couple of documents which were in reality Latin exercises, examined them with great care, pulled his hat over his eyes, and marched through the portals with the air of one who has important business, not to be delayed a moment, in connection with dock warrants. He assumed, in fact, the character of a junior clerk. He did not for a moment deceive the policemen, who knew that he was in some way connected with the family of Hamblin, the great Indigo merchants, and that he was only here to prowl round and look about him. It is against the rules to admit anyone except on business, but this boy was an exception. Besides, on this occasion, when he came out again, they had their revenge.

Once within the Docks, the boy can go where he likes undisturbed. There are the great ships in the basin, some unloading with the aid of mighty derricks and steam-cranes, and a great 'yeo heave oh!' and a running of chains and a dropping of ropes and a deft stowing in their places on the wharves of

cases, casks, bags, and boxes, while the busy feet trample and boatswains whistle, and the laden men run backwards and forwards as if they were merry-making instead of furnishing an illustration of the primeval curse. There are the officers who seem never tired of looking on and checking the delivery of cargo told out for them as it goes overboard; there are the piles of bales under the sheds which seem to grow larger and larger; there are rows of the inexhaustible ships which are for ever pouring out their contents.

Young Nick knows better than to venture near one of the vessels which are loading or unloading. He stands afar off and watches these; well out of the reach of men who, if boys get in their way, are capable of a cuff which not only hurts, but also humiliates, as well as of an oath which may even please if it be of strange and novel construction. Now mates of merchantmen show great ingenuity in blasphemy.

He walked slowly round the Docks, till he came to a ship which he knew, a ship which brought home indigo, and was now waiting to take cargo before going off again, outward bound. He ran across the plank which served as a bridge to the wharf, and jumped upon the deck. Nobody was on board except a quartermaster who knew him, and grinned a salute.

'Hope you're well, Master Nick,' said the man, touching his hat.

'Quite well, thank you, Quartermaster,' replied the boy. Here was dignity! To be saluted on the hurricane-deck: what a pity that there was no one by to witness this gratifying mark of respect! 'What sort of voyage did you have?'

'So—so, sir! Weather terrible bad in the Bay.'

'Ah! I think I'll overhaul her,' said Nick, with more grandeur than he had ever assumed before in his life.

He proceeded, alone and unaided, to overhaul the ship. That is to say, he examined the cabins, the saloons, and the sleeping bunks for'ard; he inspected the cook's galley, the carpenter's cabin, descended into the engine-room, and peered down into the impenetrable darkness of the hold.

'She draws seven-and-twenty feet when she's loaded,' said the boy. 'Twenty-seven feet deep, all full of indigo for Anthony Hamblin and Company. What a heap of money they must be making!'

He returns to the deck, and nods encouragingly at the quartermaster. 'All right below,' he says, as officially as if he were an Elder Brother of the Trinity House. 'All right below.' Then he shuts one eye, and turns the other up aloft, to inspect the rigging and the masts.

'A serviceable craft, Quartermaster. A 1, first-class, and well found.

'Ay, ay, sir!' replied the man, without a smile.

Young Nick, well-pleased with his official inspection of the steamer, returned to the wharves, where, for a quarter of an hour more, he wandered among those sheds which receive dates, tamarinds, and sugar. If a stray date found its way to his mouth, he stood in the critical attitude of a taster while he ate it. When it was gone, he shook his head sadly, as if dates were no longer what he remembered dates to have been. All these acres covered with merchandise; all these ships, perpetually coming home laden and going out laden; everything wanting the hand of the merchant before it can be moved or sold, or even grown.

'Why,' cried young Nick to his soul, in an accent of fine rapture, 'why, the very first Anthony Hamblin that ever was, he who began the business, hadn't a half, nor a quarter, nor a hundredth part the chance that the juniorest clerk—'positive, juvenis, young; comparative, junior, younger; superlative, wanting' (quoting a favourite passage from the Latin Grammar); 'juniorest is the word—the juniorest clerk in the House has nowadays, if he knows how to take it. Fortunately, most of them are blind and deaf, owing to having had too much Latin subjunctive, which is enough to make any man a fool. "Balbus feared that it would be all over——" Bah! Wait till my turn comes.'

He finishes his tour of inspection through the Docks by visiting the great house of many stories in which he is most interested. He always ends with this house, just as a Chinaman, working his way through a pile of rice, tasteless and uninteresting by itself, ends with the *bonne bouche*, the morsel of 'snook,' which lies at the top. It is the Indigo House.

The dyes are arranged together, in a sort of order of merit, if you can make it out. Beyond the indigo shed are sheds in which are long, oblong, brick-like parcels, brown in colour, oozing clammy juices and irrepressible moistnesses through the pores of their wrappers. Close to the indigo house itself one becomes aware of strange men. They bring to the mind, at first sight, a reminiscence of St. Alban's Church. That is because they wear cassocks and a biretta cap. But they are not Ritualistic clergy, not at all; nor are they officially affiliated to guild, brotherhood, or mopus mock-monkery of any kind whatever. Look again. Your mind, if you be differently constituted to young Nick, finds itself ravished backwards up the stream of time. You forget the ecclesiastical man-milliners. You are far away in sunny Castile; you are assisting at a grand Function, blessed by Church and Pope. The purification of doctrine is presented to your eyes by the outward and visible ceremony of burning heretics. The garments and the cap worn

at the Auto da Fé seem to have descended to the *employés* of the indigo storehouses. They are no longer painted over with devils, it is true. One misses, and regrets the loss of, the devils; but they are of the same cut. I believe that when the Inquisition came to a sudden and untimely end, some commercial adventurer bought up all its stage properties, and sold them to the Directors of St. Katharine's Docks. If research were properly endowed, as it should be, I would investigate the history of those caps and smocks.

The sight of them always filled the heart of the boy with a sort of painful yearning. He loved them; and he could not as yet feel, as he would if he entered the House, as if they partly belonged to himself.

'We import,' he said, with a smack of his lips, as if he was detailing a list of things good to eat, 'we import indigo' (smack); 'then myrobolans' (smack), 'and cochineal' (smack). 'Great profits in all the departments: but give me indigo.'

The Indigo House is a great fire proof building, with massive stone staircase. The steps, of course, were once white; the walls were once whitewashed; both walls and steps are now a deep permanent blue; the ceiling is believed to have been originally white—that, too, is now a dark and beautiful blue. At every stage, a door opens upon a vast, low hall, everyone filled, or gradually filling, with boxes and cases containing indigo, and everyone provided with an open window, or door, at which the indefatigable crane delivers its messages in the shape of boxes. The floor of each is blue, the walls are blue, the ceiling is blue; the very desk at which the clerks enter the number of packages is blue, and they spread a fresh sheet of brown paper over it every morning, so that the writer may lay his book upon it without making that blue as well. Where there is a knot in the wood, either in the floor or in the desks, it stands out, shining, as if it were a cobble of blue-stone used for washing.

Young Nick climbs steadily and gravely up the stairs, looking into every room. There are six or seven floors; each is exactly like the one below it, except that each one seems bluer than the one below, probably because the eye itself becomes gradually incapable of seeing any other colour. The top floor of all is the sales-room, only used four times a year. Once young Nick had been privileged to behold it on one of the great days. Long tables ran from side to side, provided with little paper trays, each with its wall an inch and a half high, containing samples. The merchants and buyers went up and down curiously studying the contents of the trays, comparing them with a sample they had in a box, and every now and then making an entry in a catalogue. That was real responsibility, Nick thought, sighing for the time when he, too, might be trusted to purchase

for the firm. Outside the sales-room, on that day only, cooks were frying toothsome chops and succulent steaks for the luncheon of the buyers.

Ah! happy, grand, glorious, and enviable lot, to be a merchant of London City and port—and happiest lot of all, to be a merchant in the Indigo trade.

The Docks had no more to show the boy, who descended the stairs slowly and came out into the sunshine, which for a while was blue, like the walls of the place he had left. He had seen the loading and the unloading; he had overhauled a ship entirely by himself, and on his own responsibility; he had seen the smocks and biretta caps again, and had visited once more those vast walls of the Indigo House which, gloomy and dark as they were, seemed to him more delightful than the Crystal Palace, more sunny than Clapham Common.

As he approached the gates, the three merry policemen who guarded them winked each with his left eye, and ranged themselves before the portals.

'Now, sir,' said the first, 'we'll see what you're carrying out, if *you* please.'

'Ah!' said the second jocular one, 'a hundredweight or so of cigars, I dessay.'

'Yes,' said the third mad wag, 'or a hogshead o' brandy, I shouldn't wonder. Now, sir.'

Young Nick was not frightened: not at all: he was delighted. This was an adventure which he had not suspected. It would be grand to tell the boys next day. He feigned terror.

'O Lord!' he cried, 'this is dreadful. You don't think, really, I've got any cigars, do you, gentlemen?'

He was so thin, and his trousers and jacket were so tight, that even a solitary cigarette would have been detected in any of his pockets.

The policemen scowled: the merry policemen frowned.

'We shall see,' they said.

'And brandy, too?' asked young Nick. 'Oh! what would they do if you found I had brandy?'

'Fifteen years for brandy,' said the first jester; 'come, young sir, we must search you.'

'This way, young gentleman,' said the second, leading the way into the lodge.

'What will you take to square it?' asked the boy, with earnest eyes under his white eyelashes.

'Square it?' replied the third policeman; 'that's bribery and corruption. Your words must be took down, young gentleman.'

'Must they?' said Nick; 'then there's nothing for it'—he gathered himself ready for a spring—'but to—cut it.' Here he darted under the arm of the third policeman, and scudded swiftly

down the street, turning to the right for about a hundred yards, when finding that no one followed, he stopped running, and began to whistle.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW YOUNG NICK MADE A MOST SURPRISING DISCOVERY.

QUITE sure that no one was following him, the boy recollected that he was hungry. It was half-past two, a good hour beyond his regular dinner-time. He resolved on looking about for a place where he could dine.

He was in a district interesting to many kinds of people—the clergyman, the policeman, the philanthropist, the total abstinence man, and the doctor. The street was as much given over to mercantile Jack as any Quartier in a mediæval city was given over to a special trade. Every other house was devoted to the interests of eating or drinking, or both, outside the office of the Board of Trade. These houses were all full of the 'splendid fellows' whose appearance had afforded young Nick such unfeigned satisfaction. They had finished their dinner and were now sitting 'over their wine;' that is, they were drinking and smoking. Young Nick could not go into one of these houses, that was quite certain. Besides, the sailors were not alone: with them were women who frightened the boy; it was not so much that their complexions were purple, red, or ghastly pale, nor that their eyes rolled horribly like the eyes of a hungry wild beast; but they were swearing loudly, drinking copiously, and their voices were hoarse and rough. To all conditions of men, at any age, such women are a terror. I believe that even mercantile Jack regards their companionship as one of the horrible circumstances attending his joyless lot.

Young Nick held on, and presently found himself in a long and narrow street called Cable Street, where the presence of the sailor was less overwhelming. The street was full of shops, and of people going up and down buying or pretending to buy. It is quite a leading street, a sort of Westbourne Grove to the district. The things offered for sale are calculated, as in all markets, according to the demand. The butchers' shops contain chiefly what are known to the trade as 'ornamental blocks,' with sheeps' heads and those less-esteemed portions of the animal which are not eagerly bought up by a voluptuous aristocracy. The fishmongers have nothing but herrings, in their various branches, such as bloaters, 'soldiers,' and kippered herrings, with salt-fish and sprats; there are more than the

ordinary number of pawnbrokers, and there are shops peculiar to the locality, and suggestive. In one window, for instance, young Nick observed a centipede hanging in a bottle full of spirits, the skin of a snake, a gruesome case full of tarantulas and scorpions, a handful of soiled ostrich feathers, a child's caul (but this was only advertised), and a collection of bamboo canes.

At the end of Cable Street the boy turned to the left and found himself in a very respectable and even genteel street. It was broad and clean: it had no shops, or hardly any: the houses were small, but the tenants seemed to take pride in their appearance. Considerable variety was shown in the painting of the doors, which were red, yellow, or green, according to the taste of the tenant; all of the houses had clean white blinds.

In the East End there are hundreds of streets like this: who the people are, where they find employment, one cannot even guess. In the window of every tenth house one sees an announcement that dressmaking in all its branches is carried on there: this is an open confession of poverty. Occasionally, a card proclaims the fact that a room is to be let, which is another open acknowledgment of insufficiency. Yet most of the houses are rented by responsible people, who are able to pay their rent out of their incomes.

If, again, it is difficult to imagine how so many hundreds of thousands do somehow pick up a little income, the brain reels when one tries to understand what the amusements of these people can be. They have no theatres, except, perhaps, Whitechapel-house for melodrama; they have no picture-galleries, no concert-halls, no parks; they have not only no means of acquiring the civilisation of the West End, but they have absolutely no means of instituting comparisons and so becoming discontented. I believe that these people, provided they earn enough for beef and beer, are absolutely contented. In the summer they run down to Southend by cheap excursions; they throng the pleasure-boats to Gravesend. In the winter they vegetate: go to the daily work, come home in the evening, smoke a pipe, and go to bed. On Sundays they have the Church and Chapel, the latter for choice. Except for the organisation of their chapels, they have no society at all, and know no one except their own relations. No country town is so dull, and so devoid of society, distraction, and amusement, as the East End of London.

There ought to be a prefect of the East End: he should be one of the royal princes; he should build a palace among the people: there should be regiments of soldiers, theatres, picture-galleries, and schools, to wake them up and make them dismally discontented about their mean surroundings. The first step in the elevation of a people is to make them discontented.

Another thing—the East End covers a level which stretches for miles: it includes all those places which, not being so squalid as Whitechapel and the neighbourhood of Cable Street, are yet as destitute of the means of artistic grace. From the East End of London there has never come any prophet at all, either in art, in music, in preaching, in acting, in prose, in poetry, or in science. Prophets cannot come from a level so dead and a society so dull. Country towns, the fields, the hillside, can show prophets: the West End has produced prophets by hundreds: only the East End has no one. Perhaps if one were to arise, he would be so little understood, so rudely reminded that he was out of the grooves of respectability, that he would speedily cease to prophecy, and presently droop and die, before the world was able to become aware of him.

Lastly, if one wanted to hide, to go away for a term of years, or altogether, what better place could be found than a quiet street south of Whitechapel? It is not an Alsatia—not at all: it is a highly respectable place. There are no habitual criminals, unless you reckon in that class the sailors who are habitually drunk when they are at home. People would not begin by suspecting a stranger who could show that he had means of earning a livelihood: he might live among them for years, without being known or inquired after: none of his West End friends would ever come near the place; no one would seek for him here.

Later on, young Nick would always declare that such thoughts as these were running through his brain on that day. But I doubt. Mankind is apt to remember little things which are too picturesque, and group themselves too easily to be altogether probable. Nature is generally flat in her composition, and a clever arrangement is not so common with her as quite inartistic grouping. So that I suspect young Nick of romancing when he narrates the events of this remarkable day.

He was really getting quite wonderfully hungry: he tightened his waistband, having heard that it affords relief to shipwrecked mariners, when they have been without food for a month or two, to do so. He was desperately hungry, and wondering how much farther he would have to go—it was already close on three o'clock—when he passed a coffee-house.

The place looked clean: there was a white blind in the window: before it, three eggs in a plate, a lump of butter, a piece of streaky bacon, and two mutton-chops uncooked. There was also suspended before his eyes a tariff of prices. The boy read it carefully. He had his eighteenpence intact. He could have a mutton-chop for fivepence, potatoes for one penny, bread for the same, an egg for twopence, butter for one penny, and so on.

He hesitated no longer, but opened the door and walked in.

The place was empty except for one man who was sitting in the box opposite to that in which young Nick sat down. The man was reading the paper and was leaning back in the corner with the sheet before him, so that Nicolas did not see his face. He sat down, looked about him, took off his hat, rapped the table with his stick and called 'Waiter!' as loud as he dared.

The waiter was a girl, neat and quick.

'Bring me, if you please,' said Nicolas, 'as quickly as you can, a chop—yes'—ticking up the cost mentally—'and potatoes, and bread, and an egg to follow, and butter—that makes tenpence, and a cup of coffee, that will be a shilling.' He remembered afterwards that it looks shabby to add up the bill for yourself out loud while you are ordering the meal. However, the great thing was not to go beyond that eighteenpence. 'And bring me to-day's paper—the half with the money-market intelligence, please; I am anxious to read the money market news.'

The man with the newspaper started when he heard the boy's voice, and glanced furtively from behind his paper. Then his fingers, when they held the paper, began to tremble. The paper brought, Nicolas took a great deal of time and trouble to fold it, so that it should rest easily against the cruet-stand, and thus allow itself to be read while he was taking his dinner. He was not really so oppressed with a craving for intellectual food as to want to read while he was eating, but he had frequently observed the clerks in Crosby Hall take dinner and the *Daily Telegraph* at the same time, the murders with the meat and the paragraphs with the pudding, and he thought the eagerness to lose no time helped to distinguish the complete clerk. So he spread out the paper with the money-market news outside, and had just got it fairly in position when the chop came. It was a generous five-pennyworth, that chop; it must have been cut from a larger and nobler specimen of the mutton-providing animal than ordinary—Nicolas felt grateful to the sheep—a chop with a due proportion of fat, not a lump as big as your fist to be cut away, and then nothing but a bit of lean the size of a pigeon's egg. He made to himself these observations as he went on. 'The potatoes might be mealier,' he murmured, 'but when a man's hungry, what odds does a waxy one make? None at all.' He forgot the money-market news in his hunger, and cleared off the whole of that chop down to the bone without reading a word. Then he waited two minutes or so for the egg and coffee, and began to read half aloud, for the benefit of the stranger opposite to him.

'Hum! Russians down. Don't wonder. Why do they keep up at all? Great Westerns up again, and Brighton A's firm—ha!'

He enjoyed this little comedy because he had perceived, with

those sharp eyes of his, that the stranger was interested in him and, when he was not looking that way, was taking hurried glances at him from the corner of his paper. Now, the interest which young Nick everywhere excited as an Albino made him callous as regards these little attentions, but he was in hopes that by the wisdom of his remarks he might cause the stranger to admire his business qualities as much as he did those physical attributes, of which he felt that it would be wrong to be too proud.

Then the egg and coffee were brought and despatched. When the repast was quite finished, young Nick laid down the paper and called the waiter.

'My bill,' he asked grandly.

It amounted, as he had estimated, to one shilling. He still had sixpence left. 'Should he walk home, and so leave himself free to spend that sum in cakes, or should he—which would be a more sensible course—make his way back to London Bridge, and then take the omnibus to Clapham?'

While he turned this difficulty over in his mind, a rustling of the paper showed him that the other occupant of the coffee-house was watching him again.

This became more interesting. Nicolas had no objection to be watched if the scrutiny meant admiration. It is not every boy of fourteen who has white hair, white eyebrows, and a delicately pink complexion. These things are not so common, if you please: a boy who owns them must as much expect to be looked at wherever he shows himself, as a reigning beauty when she goes to a garden-party. He was pleased to be able to gratify this laudable curiosity. If he had been asked to do so he would even have stood upon a chair, so that everybody might see him.

But this furtive curiosity, this sneaking behind a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, this prying over a corner when he himself was looking another way, was disquieting. Why couldn't the stranger lay down the paper and look at him as one man at another? And this modest Paul Pry, whether he had taken his dinner or not, called for nothing, and yet seemed in no hurry to go away. Nicolas, for his part, felt that it was high time for him to go, and yet was loth to go without to some extent solving the mystery of the stranger.

They were quite alone now, because the girl, seeing they had taken and paid for all they were likely to want, had left the room and gone away.

The man wore a tall and rather seedy hat, which was visible above the paper; his fingers—those of them, at least, which were visible—were white, not at all the fingers of a working man; and his boots were worn down at heel. Presumably he

was some quite poor clerk. But why did he go on in that ridiculous fashion, holding the paper before him?

Presently the boy was seized with an inspiration. He gently took his penknife from his pocket, and opened it noiselessly. The paper was held, stretched out tight, well up before the mysterious reader's face. Young Nick put on his hat, took his stick in the left hand, and his penknife in the right. He then carefully measured with his eye the space between himself and the door, and concluded that being already in the passage between the tiers of boxes, he had a sufficient start. This decided, he advanced cautiously to the stranger, and without saying one word, ripped the paper with his penknife from top to bottom.

'That's the way with these penny papers,' he said coolly. 'They go at the least thing. All made up of old paper and Esparto grass! Give me the *Ti*——'

Here the stranger raised his head, and the boy reeled backwards, faint and sick.

'Oh, oh, oh! It's a ghost without a beard! Oh, oh, oh! It's—it's—it's—UNCLE ANTHONY!'

CHAPTER XXII.

HOW ANTHONY HAMBLIN LOOKED.

No other than Uncle Anthony!

When the boy, recovering from the first shock, had made up his mind, by much staring, that it really was his deceased uncle come to life again, only without his beard, he tried to pull himself together, and to assume, with indifferent success, his usual air of importance.

'This,' he said, with a little stammer and a natural quiver in the voice, 'is a pretty Go! A very pretty Go, it is!'

Anthony Hamblin stared blankly at the boy, with reddened cheeks. No criminal, caught *in flagrante delicto*, red-handed, knife in fist, with the spoil under his arm, actually lifting the swag, ever showed so hangdog a countenance. He said nothing.

'Now, Uncle Anthony,' the boy continued, feeling every moment firmer as to head and legs, and awakened to the comprehension that this was the noblest opportunity that ever came to mortal boy, 'considering that a public coffee-house is not the best place to discuss family secrets, and that I at least am accustomed to more respectable places of appointment, we had better go to your own house or lodgings, if you have any, and talk things over there. If you are ready, we will go at once. If

not. I will wait. As for waiting, I don't care how long I wait. I can send a telegram to relieve the old lady. And as for that, the ice has melted long ago, and she won't think I've followed your example. Bah! You and your ice. Oh, the cunning! For such an oh-be-joyful occasion as the present I could wait all night, and go home with my eyes skinned in the morning with Alison to tell the news to.

Anthony Hamblin moved one foot. Nicolas interpreted the motion, wrongly and hastily, as indicative of a desire for flight.

'No,' he said firmly, 'you don't. Give up that idea. You've bolted enough already. You know me, Uncle Anthony, and my character for determination. If you run, I run too. And if I run after you there *may* be—I don't say there will—but there *may* be such a crowd, and such a howling, and such a diving after a middle-aged elderly bolter and a younger man with white eyebrows, as you never heard before in all your life. Besides, if you were to get away, I've only got to go to the House and tell the partners that you're not drowned at all, but living at the far end of Cable Road, which leads to the western extremity of nowhere. Then they will just come over and catch you somewhere or other in the very act, as I did. Think of that. Because you must eat, Uncle Anthony.'

Anthony Hamblin, with pale and shamefaced cheek, sighed, rose, and led the way. Nicolas followed closely at his heels.

Anthony turned to the left, and walked slowly along the pavement. Nicolas saw that he looked older. His shoulders stooped; his hair had gone greyer: his beard, as we have seen, was quite gone. Also, he was very shabby in his dress—his hat was rusty at the edges: his boots were down at heel.

Notwithstanding these symptoms of distress, the boy felt inclined to the most rapturous joy. He was fain to give outward and visible expression to it by a double-shuffle, a wild contortion of the limbs, a cracking of the fingers, as he followed his prisoner, so that he looked like some grim old caricature of the devil, as carved on a cathedral wall, capering behind a victim. No victim, even under the melancholy circumstances imagined by mediæval free-masons, could have looked more miserable than Anthony, who walked on with hanging head and downcast demeanour, as if he were going anywhere—where those victims were going. Suddenly the boy stopped and began feeling his pockets.

'Stop, Uncle Anthony!' he cried. 'Stop, I say. We've got to turn back.'

'What is it?'

'My knife—left it at the coffee-house. Now, then, right about. You go first. A new knife—three blades—real buck's-horn.'

They observed the same order in returning to the coffee-house, where the knife was found on the floor; and, in coming back again, the boy prepared, by turning up cuffs and squaring his shoulders, for precipitate action, if necessary.

About half-way down Cannon Street Road, which was the name of this retreat, and next door to a small dissenting chapel, Anthony Hamblin stopped, and pulled out a latch-key. The house was, like all its neighbours, small, having four or six rooms only. The door was painted a rich, a flaunting red. In the window of the ground-floor was a large card, on which Nicolas read the following announcement:

MR. A. HAMPTON,
Teacher of Writing, Arithmetic, and Free-hand Drawing.

Below this legend, and on either side of it, was drawn, with many an artful flourish and crafty curve, in freehand, and apparently with a quill pen, gigantic quills, whose feathers were like the branches of a palm for richness and redundancy. Nicolas recollected, all at once, that his uncle had often, in the old days, delighted himself with such caligraphic exercises.

Anthony Hamblin, crestfallen and shamefaced, opened the door, and led the way into the ground-floor front. Arrived there, he sat down before the window in a hopeless, resigned sort of way, as if he would do no more, but must, unresisting, let fate go on.

'Upon my word,' said the boy, looking round, 'upon—my—word, this is a very pretty sort of lodging for the head of the House! Gone a Writing-mastering, too.'

'I am no longer head of the House,' said Anthony humbly; 'I am a dead man.'

It certainly was not such a room as once sheltered the head partner in the firm. It was only about twelve feet square. Its furniture consisted of one arm-chair and two cane-bottomed chairs, of which one had lost a leg; there was a table and a sort of sideboard *pratiqué* in the wall beside the fireplace; on it stood half a dozen books, the whole of Anthony Hamblin's library. There was a cupboard on the other side of the fireplace. Nothing else. No pictures on the wall, no decorations of any kind, except a couple of wooden pipes on the mantelshelf, and a tobacco-pouch. There were no curtains, but only a clean white blind.

'This is my one room,' Anthony explained, while the boy curiously examined every article of the furniture; 'my only room. Here I live. My bed is in that cupboard; at night I drag it down.'

The boy examined every portion of the furniture minutely, and then turned to his uncle.

'You look thin, Uncle Anthony. Your boots are gone at the heels; your coat is shabby—the cuffs are frayed; your hat is seedy: and you don't look happy; and—and——'

Here this remarkable boy choked, and seized his uncle by the hand, and burst into a fit of sobbing and crying.

'Don't, boy!' cried Anthony Hamblin, much more deeply moved by this passion of grief than he had been by the boy's bounce and arrogance. 'Don't, Nicolas; crying will do no good. Tell me—tell me about Alison.'

Nicolas stopped crying almost as suddenly as he began.

'Every man,' he said presently, by way of apology to himself for his weakness, and while still mopping up the tears, 'has his weak point. You find that out, uncle, when you've got an enemy, and then you can stick pins into him all day long.'

A thought struck him here. He went to the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

'Now,' he said, 'the door's locked. You can't get out till I let you, and I don't intend to let you till I know what this little game means.'

He sat on the table, one leg dangling and the other resting across it; an elbow on the leg, and his chin in his hand. He had taken off his hat, and with his white eyebrows, the knowing light in his eyes, and the smile of pride which he naturally felt in the situation, he looked more like an imp than seemed possible in living boy.

'Nicolas,' said Anthony, sitting before him like a culprit, 'you have, by accident, discovered a great secret.'

'Under Providence, uncle, as the old lady would say, I have.'

'Is it possible for a boy to keep a secret?'

'I have lived in his house,' said Nicolas, addressing the furniture, which was very unsympathetic in its scantiness; 'I have lived in his house for thirteen years and more, and he doubts my power of keeping a secret!'

'Boy,' said the man risen from the dead, sternly, 'no fooling! This is no matter for laughing. Can you and will you keep a secret?'

'I can, Uncle Anthony,' replied young Nick, with a sudden change of manner; 'I can and I will.'

There was something reassuring about the boy's manifest resolution of honestly keeping the secret. He enjoyed it too much, in fact, to reveal it, at least immediately. Yet Anthony Hamblin, filled with shame and dismay, looked upon the boy with suspicion. Was his sacrifice to be worthless after all? Did it depend solely on the discretion of a child so volatile?

'Living at the East End,' said Nicolas, as if desirous to change the subject, 'is all very well for a man who, like me, takes an interest in the Docks, in indigo stores, and shipping; but for

you, Uncle Anthony, who never put on a canvas coat, nor wore a cap to keep off the blue dust in your life, I can't understand the attraction. All very well if a man wanted to write a novel of dull life, and came here to see what dulness really means; but you don't write novels, and you used to like cheerfulness. Or if you wanted to find out how poor people lived, and what a beastly thing it is to be poor; but you never wanted to know that. Silver-spoon babies never do. The taste, I suppose, is so different from pewter that they don't feel a yearning for change, nor a curiosity to taste any other kind of metal. And yet if you don't like the Docks, didn't care for poor people, and weren't curious about their ways, what was it drove you away from home? It wasn't any row, that I know of. You and Alison hadn't quarrelled, had you?'

Anthony shook his head dejectedly.

'As for me,' the boy went on, stroking his chin, 'I can't remember that I ever said or did anything that could induce you to run away. I was always kind to you, I believe.'

'Always,' echoed Anthony, without the ghost of a smile.

'Then,' said young Nick, getting down from the table to get better vantage-ground, standing with his feet well apart, his hands rammed down into his pockets as far as they would go, and his shoulders raised—this gave him an expression of wonderful sagacity, combined with the deepest cynical knowledge of human nature—'then, Uncle Anthony, I am sorry to say that there remains only one supposition. It pains me to say it, but I must. Why does a rich man, with a comfortable home and people who are fond of him, suddenly bolt?—leaving his coat behind him, too, as if he was Joseph in the pit, to prove that his goose was already cooked and his bucket kicked. Why, I say? Oh, Uncle Anthony, who would have thought it of you? Because HE'S DONE SOMETHING—I don't know what—SOMETHING! Somebody must have given you the straight tip in good time. You thought you had better bolt, so as to avoid the row.'

Anthony made no reply. Nicolas resumed his seat on the table.

'If you like to confide in me,' Nicolas went on, 'I'll give you the best advice in my power. Perhaps it isn't too late.'

Still Anthony was silent; but he rose from his chair, and began to walk up and down the room.

'Everything,' said Nicolas, encouragingly, 'can be squared for money. Give me money and the name of the party, and I'll undertake to square him.'

Anthony laughed. He was at last moved to laugh. The boy's importance and confidence were too absurd.

'You, boy! What could you do?'

'Now, here's prejudice again!' he expostulated. 'After knowing me intimately for thirteen years, my uncle can't trust me for a confidential piece of work because I've got a jacket on instead of a coat! I thought better of you, Uncle Anthony.'

Anthony stopped in his walk, and regarded his youthful adviser meditatively.

'Boy,' he said gravely, 'I cannot tell you the reasons of my disappearance: that is impossible. Nor can I ever reappear again; that is equally impossible.'

'Quite impossible? Oh, Uncle Anthony, surely money will square it!'

'No; money cannot do everything.'

'Can't *anything* be done?'

'Nothing.'

'Think of Alison, uncle—think how she's cried her eyes out.'

'Poor child! poor child!'

He turned his face to the window, and there was silence for a space.

'Think of me!' said Nicolas. 'Think of my ruined prospects if you don't come back. How do I know that Mr. Augustus will take me into the House?'

'I think he will,' said Anthony; 'at any rate I hope he will. Nothing can be done, Nicolas. You have found me. I shall go away from here, for fear that some one else may find me. But you must keep the secret.'

'I will keep it if you promise to let me know always where to find you. Let me write to you: and I say, uncle—O Lord! what a game we *will* have—what a game! I didn't tell you how Uncle Stephen is going on.'

'No. What is Stephen doing?'

Anthony stopped now to listen.

'He—well, first of all he came to Clapham, and took up his quarters there: smoked your cigars in the study, slept in your bed, and took your place at dinner. Oh, it was beautiful at the go-off. "My poor Alison! my dear child! My dear Flora!"—that to the old lady, you know: and to me it was, "Nicolas, my boy—Nicolas, my son," till we began to think that Black Stephen hadn't got horns and a tail after all. Wait a bit, though! All of a sudden his manner changes. First he orders me and the old lady to pack up and be off out of the house; then he ups and tells Alison that she wasn't your heiress after all, because you never were married.'

'What?' cried Anthony, with a sudden hot flush on his cheek.

'Steady, steady! Wait a bit. I thought when it came to the old lady and me being ordered into the street, that would fetch you, as nothing ever fetched you before. It shows your proper feeling, uncle, and I like you the better for it. Let me go

on. Then he goes to the partners, and tells them that he—Uncle Stephen—was the real heir to everything; and then he goes to the Court of Probate, and demands letters to carry on the estate. "Oh, Jeminy!" says the judge—crafty old man, that!—"here's artfulness!"—said he'd be blowed if he'd write him any letter at all—said he didn't believe you were dead, but only gone away somewhere on a lark, as had happened to his own brothers more than once—said Alison was to go on enjoying the estate, and eating as much as ever she possibly could, till such time as it was proved, first, that you were really dead and gone, whereas here you still live and kick; and second, that Alison was not your heiress, whereas everybody always knew that she was.'

'Tried to rob Alison of her inheritance!' murmured Anthony, with livid face. 'The scoundrel!'

'Now you see, uncle,' pursued Nicolas, 'here we are in a cleft stick, on the horns of a dilemma, and in a quandary such as you never thought was coming out of it, I'm sure. What is to be done?'

'Tell me more about Alison.'

'Alison's very jolly,' the boy replied—'eats hearty and sleeps well. That fellow Gilbert Yorke is always about the place since Uncle Stephen first showed the horns. He seems to consider that Alison looks pretty in black. I don't. That is to say, you know, it's a matter of opinion. A dark girl wants the relief of a bit of colour. However, Alison is a fine girl, dress her how you like; and if she'd wait for me, I might think of her in ten years' time. After all, she'd be gone off a good deal by the time I was four-and-twenty. Worst of girls, that is—no last.'

'Then she doesn't fret much. She has forgotten her father.'

'Well, she does—that's the uncomfortable part. You never know when she won't break out again. Spoiled a really good pudding yesterday by crying in the middle of a plateful—her pipes always burst when you least expect it. And then the old lady chimes in. A man *can't* enjoy his meals if he's rained on that way. It's all your fault. If we'd had a regular funeral, with mourners and hat-bands and that, as we had every right to expect in a respectable family, we should have got through our crying, and adone with it once for all. How's a man, I should like to know, to feel comfortable over his grub, when first it's Alison, and then it's the old lady, crying in chorus? Might as well sit down to dinner, with your umbrella up, in a shower-bath. It was a roll-jam-pudding, too!'

'I wish I could trust you,' said Anthony, laying his hands on the boy's shoulders. 'Will you promise not to betray me?'

'I promise faithfully, uncle. I will say nothing, on two con-

ditions, which I'll tell you presently. But are you going to let Alison be dished out of all her money ?'

'No, I am not. That is the one thing, the only thing, that will force me out of my seclusion. That is the one thing. If Stephen wins his case, he will find that he has reckoned without —his dead brother.'

'You will come back again, in that case, and in spite of everything ?'

'I will, in spite of everything.'

Nicolas breathed freely. This was good news, indeed. In any case Alison was safe. And if Alison was provided for, then he himself would not be forgotten. The bright eyes beneath those long white eyebrows twinkled with delight.

'Very well, uncle. Then we understand one another. If things go wrong you'll turn up at the right moment, frustrate his politics, make him sing out like bricks, and confound his knavish tricks. But, I say, why not tell me just now where you were married ?—just for curiosity, and because we are both enjoying the same jolly game.'

'No, Nicolas ; I shall not tell you that. I shall tell you no more ; and now you must go.'

'Well, if you *won't* let me square the other side, and if you won't tell me all about your marriage, I suppose I must. Still' (he got off the table again, and put on his hat slowly), 'I don't half like it. You have promised to interfere at the last moment, just when Uncle Stephen thinks he's going to grab it all. That's satisfactory so far : but how do I know that you won't bolt yourself the moment you are out of my sight ?'

'If I trust my secret in your keeping,' said Anthony, 'is not that a sufficient guarantee ?'

'Well, no,' said Nicolas ; 'because the truth is that you didn't trust it. I found it—I took it ; you couldn't help yourself.'

'Well—well !' said Anthony, impatiently.

'Now, then, for my conditions. I keep your secret, Uncle Anthony, faithfully, if you promise me two things They are —first, don't bolt.'

'I will not, unless I have cause for suspecting you.'

'Second, when you come back to the House—because of course you will ; Uncle Stephen *can't* be endured much longer—you will take me into it. I'm not a fool, Uncle Anthony' (the boy became here almost solemn in his earnestness)—'no Albino ever was a fool yet, so far as Universal history books (with dates) can inform the class. I'm always trying to learn things that will make me fit for a City life. There's nothing in all the world I would rather have, after a bit, than a partnership in the House. Not at first, you know ; I am content to work my way right up from the very bottom, only let me have the chance.'

'My dear boy,' said Anthony, his kind eyes softening, and laying his hands on the lad's shoulders, 'I shall never be able to give you the chance, I shall not be there.'

'But promise, uncle.'

'I promise, if I am there.'

'That's quite enough,' said Nicolas, resuming his habitual manner. 'Some fellows—suspicious fellows—would require a stamped agreement. Between man and man, I say, if men's words are worth anything, a verbal agreement is enough.'

'You may come to see me sometimes, if you like,' said Anthony. 'Come on half-holidays, when no one suspects you. Come and tell me about Alison.'

'I will, uncle,' said the boy; 'and about the old lady and myself. Oh, I'll keep you lively! And you shall tell me how you like writing-mastering. And remember your promise—fain larks—no bolting! Here's your key.'

Nicolas shook hands with head erect, but his hands were a little shaky, and outside the house he put his knuckles into his eyes for a moment. Then, because a boy in the street who was passing by laughed at him, he chucked that boy's hat into a passing cab, and gave him one to remember him on the left ear. The necessity of recovering the cap prevented the boy from retaliating, although he was bigger. After that, Nicolas went on his way in a serene and even joyous frame of mind. Presently, thinking over the convivial side of the new discovery, over all the possibilities of this delightful game of hide-and-seek, and how it would light up and illumine the summer months, and how it would eventually glorify and immortalise himself, he grew more than joyous—he became rapturous. He could no longer walk, but began to dance. He danced behind and beside nervous old gentlemen, so that they were fain to stop and beg him to pass on; he danced beside grave matrons and elderly single women as if he were their frisky son; he mingled in the ranks of girls' schools, and danced among the girls, as if he were a frivolous pupil; he chanced upon a pale and unhappy two-by-two belonging to a commercial academy, and danced among the spiritless boys as if he dared the usher to box his ears; he overtook a heavily-laden and very stout old lady going home from shopping, and danced all round her, whistling loudly the while. This figure, if it is executed properly, with the back presented to the victim's face, and plenty of double-shuffle, is really expressive, and disconcerts old ladies excessively. It was a favourite feat, I believe, with the Mohocks and Scourers of old. This old lady, for her part, was so much put out by it that she dropped all the things she was carrying—her bag, her basket, her parcels, her gloves, her shawl, her umbrella, her spectacles, and her thimble—anything that could possibly tumble from her,

These spread as they fell, till the whole pavement was strewn with the wreck. She is still, I believe, engaged in picking up her property. But long before she realised the extent of the calamity, the boy, whose good spirits prompted him to so great activity, was out of sight, still dancing and still whistling as he went.

He arrived at Clapham about half-past five. He was boisterous, he was joyful in that house of subdued melancholy. He boldly suggested champagne instead of tea; he spoke vaguely about great things in the way of festivities to come; he declined altogether to learn his lessons for the next day; he led his mother to think that he was going to have something—the measles, a fit, or perhaps the mumps, which are said sometimes to begin with an accession of supernatural and unaccountable hilarity.

When he got Alison quite by herself for a moment, he assumed a mysterious manner and winked and nodded.

'How are they getting on for you, Alison?' he asked.

'Nothing has been found yet, I am sorry to say.'

'Well, I am not a man who promises rashly; only, the moment you think the game is up, you give me the tip straight away.'

'Give you the tip?'

'Tip it to me. Then you shall see—hey! presto! up goes Uncle Stephen, horns and tail and all, blown to little smithereens, and Alison comes home in triumph! Ring the bells! beat the drums! and hooray for writing-masters all!'

For several days after that the boy maintained, with Alison, a running fire of obscure allusions to writing masters. He talked about the great amount of their gains, their enviable position in the social scale, their enjoyable work, their content and happiness. What did he mean?

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW ADVERTISING PROVED A DISAPPOINTMENT.

The advertisements were all put into the papers, and the cousins waited impatiently for the result.

There were no results at all after a week. 'They are searching the registers,' said Gilbert.

They waited another week; there were no results still.

'Give me time to look through the London registers,' said Alderney Codd, hopefully.

Alison shook her head. She was not sanguine of success, even in her brightest moods, when she continually thought about that story of the ship's captain, who went off his head and signed articles as an able seaman.

'He may come back,' she said, foolishly dwelling on this dream—fortunately, it was not often that she permitted herself so great a happiness. 'He may come back. Perhaps he will come back. I shall never give up that hope. What is the good of trying to discover what he wanted to conceal? You had better give it up, Gilbert, and give the other man all the money, and let me go away somewhere and be forgotten.'

'Give it up!' he cried; 'why we have only just begun.'

'It is useless,' she replied despondently; 'you are only making yourself and me more unhappy than we need be. Give it up, and me too, and go back to your chambers and your law-work.'

Alison's despondent view was not the only disheartening thing about the work which Gilbert had set himself to do. It was impossible to deny the difficulty which presented itself at the very beginning. Why was all mention of the marriage, if there was a marriage, suppressed in the diaries? Even a courtship takes time. Why was even the courtship concealed and suppressed? Why did a man who was frank and candid as the day in everything else, keep a guarded silence in what was probably his only love affair? and, silence or not, what opportunity could be found for love-making? What room was there in that busy life, so faithfully recorded in the diaries, for love, courtship, and wedlock?

Many young men live in chambers; whatever their occupations during the day, they have at least their evenings free; they are not generally supposed to record in diaries the *menus plaisirs* of those evenings. Other young men live at home, but do not always, as their mothers would wish, spend the evening at home: nor do they always truthfully explain in the morning where they have been and what they did the night before: deception, *suppressio veri*, is practised. Anthony Hamblin did not have chambers, nor did he spend his evenings abroad. Not at all: he devoted himself, with the devotion of a Frenchman, to his mother. He never showed the least inclination to any kind of profligacy, wastefulness, or fastness. He was that very rare creature, a young man who is 'steady,' and yet not a prig in morals. Had he been, for instance, a young man of the present day, he would have made himself an athlete, and kept himself in constant training. The only athletics in his day were those games which a late lamented dean once stigmatised as 'immoral, because athletic,'—whist and cricket Billiards there was also, but the dean never heard of that game. Football was for boys; young men scorned to run races; no

one would have gone a yard out of the way to see the longest jump, the highest jump, the farthest shy, the fastest run. Anthony Hamblin, up to the age of three or four and thirty, went home every evening to dinner, and stayed at home. He was the constant companion, the solace, the prop of his mother. He was passionate in his love for her. Stephen it was who early broke away from the domestic coop: Stephen it was who lived in chambers, paid duty visits, borrowed money, squandered and scattered. It was Anthony who cheered the last years of his mother's life, and, for her sake, not because he was a passionless young prig, was content to forego his own pleasures—the ordinary and innocent gaieties of early manhood.

How then could he find time to get married?

These doubts, when they arose, Gilbert pushed into the background. Before Alison he was confident, brave, and cheerful. Everything, he declared, would happen just exactly as they wished.

As regards the rest of the family, there was division. The two partners remained staunch. So did the Colonel and the Dean, and the rest of the male cousins who belonged to the generation of Anthony. The younger members, accustomed in these latter days to the contemplation of a laxer code of morals, generally took the more gloomy view; one or two openly declared themselves of the Black Hamblin faction. Female cousins called on Alison, and hinted at compromise, while there was yet time. If these hints were such as she could take hold of, Alison astonished those cousins, as she had gratified young Nick, by the mightiness of her wrath and the free hanging of her tongue. What they did not see, when they retired, confused and beaten down like the long grass after a thunderstorm, was the humiliation which fell upon their cousin, and the bitter tears which these doubts wrung from her when she knew that they could not see them.

Compromise! No; nothing that could show belief in her uncle's theory; nothing that should allow the bare possibility of that theory; nothing that did not admit to the full her father's honour, her mother's honour, and all that these involved.

Nothing is more certain than that, if you advertise long enough, you are sure to get something out of it. I was once assured by a stranger, whom I afterwards discovered to be connected with the advertising interests, that for twelve thousand pounds he would undertake to float anything, from a quack pill or a saline mixture to a daily paper. Thinking over this assertion, I had a dream, in which I thought I was a millionaire, that my money was all divided into little heaps of twelve thousand pounds each, and that I was devoting the whole of my vast wealth, by means of giving this philanthropic stranger one

of these heaps at a time, to floating pills, papers, theatres, saline draughts, books, music, pictures, and artistic furniture. I woke up before I reached the last heap, and I do not know how far I advanced the world.

As for the Hamblin advertisements, the first result of them was to bring Mrs. Duncombe to light.

She called herself at the office in Bedford Row, and sent up her name, with a great air of mystery, in a folded piece of paper, which, she instructed the clerk, was not to be opened, on any account, by anybody except Mr. Billiter himself.

She was a florid lady, between middle and elderly age, with a fat, good-natured face, much resembling an overblown cabbage-rose. She looked about her with suspicion. A lawyer's office has something fearsome about it, even to those who 'ought to know better;' to a woman of Mrs. Duncombe's social standing it is simply terrible. The appearance of the sharp-visaged old gentleman who received her, with his bright eyes and pointed chin, did not reassure her.

'Oh,' said Mr. Billiter, looking her all over with suspicion, 'you are Mrs. Duncombe, are you? You are the lady for whom we advertised, are you? And you are come for your reward, I suppose. Very well. Of course we do not pay anything until we are satisfied that there is no imposture. So you will be good enough to sit down and answer a few questions.'

Mrs. Duncombe obeyed, though she regarded the very chairs with distrust. Still, she obeyed. Her breath was short too, and getting up the stairs had tired her.

'I am Mrs. Duncombe,' she said presently, and without waiting for the questions—indeed, the old lawyer had gone on writing, as if no one was in the office at all, which was his pleasant way of giving sinners time for meditation and repentance—'and I am here in answer to an advertisement which my nephew read to me. Because I don't read papers myself, as a general rule, my eyes not being so good as they were, and the news not up to what it used to be and one has a right to expect.' She paused for a moment only. 'There may be, perhaps, two Mrs. Duncombes in the world. But there can't be two in connection with the sweet flower, which her initials were A. H.'

'Tell me, if you please,' said Mr. Billiter, 'what those initials stand for?'

'Aha!' she replied, with a look of profound caution, which sat comically upon her jovial and easy face. 'And suppose you want to find out the dear young lady yourself, and you've got designs upon her, and you've sent to me to help you do a mischief to my dear darling?'

'Shall we divide the name into syllables then?' asked Mr.

Billiter. 'That will be fair. I will begin. Now, then, A, L—Al.'

'There you are with your Al,' responded the lady, pleased with this ingenious manœuvre. 'Al. I, i—there you are with your Ali.'

'S, O, N—son,' Mr. Billiter went on gravely.

'And there you are with your Alison,' she added. 'That's the Christian name right enough, and the only girl I ever met with such a name out of a printed two-penny book. Now the surname. H, A, M—Ham: there you are with your Ham.'

'B,' Mr. Billiter added, emphasizing with his forefinger.

'B,' taking the word out of his mouth; 'there you are with your B—Ham-bee,' as if it was a syllable.

'L, I, N—lin; which completes the name.'

'There you are with your Hamblin—there you are with your Alison Hamblin. Lord help you, sir, I taught that little dear to spell myself, though rather rusty after all these years, and a spelling-bee not to my taste, nor a prize likely at my time of life. There you are with your Alison Hamblin. To think that I should ever have spelt her name turn-about with a lawyer! Well, sir, you haven't told me what you want to do to the dear child.'

'No harm, Mrs. Duncombe—quite the contrary. We want to do her as much good as possible. We want to protect her against a man who is trying to keep her out of her property.'

'Is he now? The pretty dear! And a goodish bit of property, too, I shouldn't wonder.'

'It is a goodish bit, indeed. Now for our questions, Mrs. Duncombe.'

'As many as you like, sir; but not too fast, through the breath being shorter than it was twenty years ago, when first I set eyes on that most blessed of little girls.'

'Yes. When did you make the acquaintance of Mr. Anthony Hamblin?'

'A fortnight before he brought me the child. I answered an advertisement for a careful person who would take charge of a child; references required. I referred to the parish doctor—the same who attended my husband in his last illness—and the vicar, the same who buried him. They spoke to my respectability, and Mr. Hamblin took me on at a truly liberal salary, being a most generous and open-handed gentleman, though never, seemingly, knowing the real value of money, and too liberal to the poor—a thing which does them more harm than good in the long-run——'

'Pray excuse me. Mr. Hamblin engaged you, on the strength of those references, to take care of the child?'

'He did, sir. He placed me in a house furnished with every-

thing you could wish, except that the cabinets and the chests of drawers were new and used to crack of a night, which is fearsome to a lonely widow woman; and a fortnight later he brought me the prettiest child, of a year old or thereabouts, that ever laughed in a nurse's eyes, or said "Ta," for a piece of sponge-cake.'

'He brought you the child? Did you not, then, go for it yourself?'

'No; he brought her. He came by the train.'

'Where did he come from?'

'Surely it was not my place to ask? He had no servant with him; he brought the infant in his own arms.'

'That is odd. Had the child any linen?'

'Yes, a basketful; but there was no mark on any of it. And she had a coral necklace. That was all she had.'

'Pray tell me more.'

'Mr. Hamblin said her name was Alison Hamblin, and that her mother was dead; then he went away. In a fortnight he came again. In a little while he used to make me send a daily report to his office in London of the child's health and progress; and he used to run down from Saturday to Monday when she got a little older. He had a bedroom in the house—his own house it was.'

'Ay,' said Mr. Billiter, 'we remember that he used to go down to Brighton.'

'The little maid grew up much like her father, only dark-complexioned; and that fond of him as she couldn't bear to say good-bye, and was always reckoning up the days to Saturday. Well, the time went on, and I was sorry indeed, I can tell you, when the day came that Mr. Hamblin said he thought the sea-air had made her a strong child, and that he intended taking her to live with him in London. So we had to part; and it was terrible——

The good woman paused, while hot tears ran down the furrows of her nose.

'It does you credit, Mrs. Duncombe,' said Mr. Billiter, referring, perhaps, to the present rather than to the past tears. 'Mr. Hamblin, then, took her away. What did he do for you?'

'He bought me an annuity, sir; one hundred pounds a year it is, and a permanent income for a woman that would otherwise have been in the workhouse in her old age. Wherefore I say every day, "God bless him and magnify his name!"'

'Thank you, Mrs. Duncombe. But he is dead—yes, Mr. Anthony Hamblin was drowned in the Serpentine in that accident of January last.'

'Dear, dear me!' she sighed; 'poor dear gentleman! This is more trouble. And Miss Alison, sir?'

'She is well. But her succession and title to the estates are disputed. We want to find, Mrs. Duncombe—we must find out somehow, when and where, and to whom, Mr. Hamblin was married. We were in hopes that you would know something about it. Can you not tell us where the child came from? Was there no mark at all upon her clothes? Was there no railway-label on her box? Think; even the least hint might be of use.'

But she shook her head.

'I know nothing, sir—no more than I have told you. A child was brought to me, and I took care of her for nine years or thereabouts. Where she came from I know no more than the baby herself knew.'

'Then, Mrs. Duncombe, I am afraid you are no use to us. But you shall have the advertised reward for producing yourself.'

'And the dear young lady, sir—may I see her?'

'Assuredly; here is her address.' Mr. Billiter wrote it down for her. 'Go whenever you please. I think she will like to see you again. And—and—Mrs. Duncombe, if you stay in the house a day or two, you might look round. Perhaps that very same box may be lying in some attic—there is always a box-room in these big houses—and you might find the railway-label; or—or if you can pick up anything, or remember anything, or find out anything, let me know. Now, good-morning.'

It was, indeed, very little to go upon—a coral necklace. Gilbert had already ascertained its existence, and that it was safe, and in Alison's custody; but no amount of searching could find the box in which, twenty years before, the child's clothes were despatched. Mrs. Duncombe, exuberant in her demonstrations of affection and anxiety to help, herself conducted the search in the trunk-room, lumber-room, and every garret and attic where was hidden away the accumulated worthlessness of half a dozen generations. Many curious things were found, but no such box as they wanted.

So far, therefore, the advertisements had not proved a success. Gilbert waited, like the Earl of Chatham, longing to be at 'em; or like Charles the Wrestler, wondering if his antagonist would come on; or like a knight-errant who wanted nothing so much as to go out instantly and slay the loathly worm, if that crafty creature, safe and snug in its cave, would only come forth to do battle and be killed.

Perhaps the parish clerks had not seen the advertisements. 'All parish clerks,' Gilbert thought, 'do not take in daily papers.' He hit upon a novel device of a more searching and thorough character. He sent a circular to every beneficed clergyman in the country, asking him to make special search. There are

about twelve thousand parishes and district churches. The thing made a capital job for an agency, which charged sixpence a hundred for addressing the envelopes, and paid the women who did the work fourpence-halfpenny. This shows what a good thing it is to have middle-men, and proves the beneficence of Providence in multiplying them so mightily that they cut each other's throats, instead—as they would do were their number less—of waxing strong, devouring the rest of mankind, getting all the money into their own hands, consuming the harvests, eating up the butter, bread, oil, honey, wine, fruit, corn, cattle, and all the fat of the land. Yet, though many women worked, several days passed before the circulars could be issued and answers received.

This time the recipients of the circular did answer; at least a good many of them sent answers. They were all to the same effect. Search had been made, and no such marriage had been discovered. Some sent useless returns, finding the marriage of a certain Hamblin a hundred years back, and demanding the reward by return of post. When it did not come, they wrote again, asking indignantly for the cause of delay, and threatening legal proceedings. Others, while admitting that their search had been fruitless, took the opportunity of advocating the claims of their Restoration Fund; their Increase of Beneficed Clergy Stipend Fund; their Soup Kitchens; their Pickled Onions Fund; their Fund for enabling the Clergy to see their way out of It; their Deaconesses' Aprons Fund; their Sisters' Cold Shoulder of Mutton Fund; their Schools; their Impoverished Bishops' Fund; their Homes; their Penitentiaries; and their Grand National Society for the Pauperisation of the British People, officered entirely by the Bishops and Clergy of the Church of England, and embracing the aims and objects of all the preceding minor societies. No fewer than twenty-five sent in a bill for time spent in conducting the search. Eight hundred and thirty-seven curates, answering for their Rectors and Vicars, hinted at the patronage of the Hamblins (which consisted of one small living), and their own unappreciated merits. Three hundred and sixty-five asked for nominations to City schools for their boys. One hundred and fifty-two asked for scholarships on the City Companies' Foundations for sons about to go to Oxford or Cambridge. All alike addressed the advertisers in terms of affectionate intimacy, as if they were all round grateful, personal friends, who could refuse each other nothing. And most of them exhibited a proficiency in mendacity to be equalled in no other profession.

This was gratifying so far; and Gilbert, who opened and read the letters, felt that this universal confidence in the generosity of a stranger had taught him to love his fellow-

creatures more deeply. At the same time, there was no discovery.

He then hit upon a third plan. If he could not find proof of the marriage, he might get upon the trace of the unknown mother.

He drew up a crafty advertisement, in which, after a brief preamble addressed to the relations and friends of missing people, he stated that at some unknown period, probably about twenty-one or two years before the date of the advertisement, a young lady, name unknown, was believed to have contracted a secret marriage, presumably under an assumed name, with a certain A. H.; that she was believed to have died within two years of the marriage; that she had left one daughter, whose initials were also A. H.; that information which would prove the marriage was now being sought, and would be very liberally rewarded.

This masterpiece he inserted in all the papers, and waited for a reply. There were hundreds of answers.

Observe that Gilbert's advertisement gave certain data—probably date, marriage, birth of a daughter, death, initials of husband, initials of child: six in all. Obviously, therefore, the replies which fell short in any one of these data would certainly be useless: or, as one or two of them might have been missed by unlearned readers, it was reasonable to suppose that some at least would be considered. But the mind of the middle and lower class Briton is illogical. He considers one fact at a time. Therefore when the advertisement appeared, everybody from whose hearth daughter, sister, aunt or great-aunt had eloped, disappeared, or run away any time during the last fifty years wrote in reply. It was astonishing, first, to mark how common an incident in family life of a certain rank this misfortune must be; secondly, to see how long and with what keenness it is remembered; and lastly, how ready a large proportion of the bereaved are to make money out of the calamity, should a way seem open.

This time, Gilbert's opinion of human nature was lowered and not raised at all by the correspondence which ensued. For some, writing as if with a bludgeon in the left hand, ready for transfer to the right when the pen was dropped, called Heaven to witness that the villain had been found at last, and demanded compensation—large and liberal compensation. Others, adopting a more Christian line, thanked Providence that the sinner was repentant, and asked what sum the advertiser proposed to pay for loss of services, anxiety, wounded honour, hope deferred, affections blighted, and lacerated feelings. Others, again, still with an eye to business, wrote to say that they held in their hands information which would prove of the highest value, but could not part

with it without a proper understanding beforehand. One or two informed the advertiser that the young person named was not dead at all, but alive, and quite ready to forgive the past in return for an annuity of proper settlement. Some concurred in demanding that the daughter should be restored to her mother's people, of course with liberal compensation and large annual allowance for her keep. Every side of human selfishness seemed laid bare in their correspondence.

Yet there was another side, else it would have been too contemptible. Dozens of letters came, written while the eyes were blurred with tears, and the mind was sick with sadness at the revival of past unhappiness. These went to the young man's heart, and brought the tears to his own eyes as he read them. They came from old ladies, from middle-aged ladies, from women of all classes. They were written in forlorn hope: they all told the same monotonous tale, how a girl had wandered from the fold and never come back again; how the mother, aged now, or her sisters, were waiting still in hope that the prodigal daughter might return. They gave their own particulars, and they asked if these would suit the story of the girl about whom the advertisers were inquiring.

'It is a great and bottomless gulf, this London,' thought Gilbert. 'Are there, every year, hundreds of girls who listen to the voice of the tempter? Are there, yearly, hundreds of homes saddened irretrievably by the flight of one? Anthony Hamblin could not have been such a man. It could not be,' he repeated, 'that Anthony Hamblin was a vulgar and selfish deceiver of girls. Yet Alison's mother must have had an existence. Suppose they found her relations among the *canaille* who burned to make money out of their own shame! Better, almost, that her friends should be found among those who still wept for the loss of their sister. It must be owned that at this period doubts assailed the young man. He found himself sometimes in the Slough of Despond, sometimes on the Hill Difficulty, sometimes in the Castle of Despair. Yet he met Alison with brave eyes, and words of courage. He would not dishearten her. To Alison, indeed, it seemed as if the arrival of Mrs. Duncombe was all that was wanted to prove her own case.

The confidence of the partners in the power of advertising rapidly diminished. They sent secretly to one Theodore Bragge, formerly of the Metropolitan Detective Police, and, unknown to Gilbert, sought his advice.

Mr. Bragge's appearance was disappointing. Nothing of the sleuth-hound about him at all. No more intelligence in his face than in that of any ordinary police-constable. 'But a solid face,' said Augustus Hamblin. Solidity, in fact, was the one virtue

Mr. Bragge's face could boast. He was clean-shaven, rather red in the nose, and looked like a butler out of place.

When the case was thoroughly put before him—it was curious that a man of such remarkable acuteness should be so slow in mastering facts—Mr. Bragge sat down and tapped his nose. Anybody can execute that simple feat. It is only when Thaumast, Panurge, and Theodore Bragge perform it, that one is struck by the boundless capabilities of so simple an action.

'This will be, likely, a longish case.'

'But do you think you can unravel it?'

Mr. Bragge smiled superior.

'There is no case, gentlemen,' he said, 'that I would not undertake.' (Which was strictly true.) 'I called this a longish case, not a difficult one. You have heard, perhaps, of the great Shottover case? I was the man who unravelled that. However, I do not boast.'

He proceeded to point out how expensive a process is detective work, and then, armed with a cheque on account, went away to begin his work at once.

He began it by a preliminary meditation, which commenced in a neighbouring tavern immediately after his interview with the partners, and lasted till eleven o'clock in the evening. It was interrupted by a whisky-and-water hot at four, a steak at five with a pint of stout, six whiskys-and-water between six and eleven, and an animated conversation during the evening with a few friends.

An English Secret Service officer tries clumsily to do what the Continental secret police are supposed, I do not know how truly, to do cleverly. It sends men to watch, spy, and ask questions. The men always get found out in their watching at the very beginning of their investigations. They are not good actors; they cannot disguise themselves; they are not generally clever; they are not always commonly intelligent. But people believe in the private inquiry man; they think that he who owns such an office must have sources of information at his command not to be got at by anybody else; they believe that he can discover a criminal, unearth a lover, prove a marriage, or find a will, when all the rest of the world have failed.

Let us, in justice to these gentlemen, acknowledge that they do nothing to undermine or lessen this belief. Quite the contrary: they accept the position assigned to them. They are professors of Sagacity. In a sense they are Professors of the Science of Human Nature. This science rests upon two or three axioms, according to these savants.

1. Everybody is, has been, or will one day be, engaged in some crime.

2. There is nothing, in reality, but the Seamy Side. The rest is pretence.

3. Truth is to be sought, not in a well, which would be foolishness; but behind and beneath the walls and roofing of lies which it is necessary to build round her in order to protect her against the wicked world's shower of gold.

4. Good men are those who only lie in the way of business.

5. Suspect every friend; look on every stranger as an enemy.

6. The booniest companion is often he whom you should trust least. Virtue does not necessarily accompany good fellowship.

7. If there is a choice of motives, choose the worst.

8. In any case, never suppose a motive which is not in some way based upon personal interest.

9. Friendship means common interest; pals are those who run in couples; friendship ceases when a man can work by himself.

10. It is generally thought better to work in the dark than in the daytime.

I have gathered these maxims from a hitherto incomplete work by Theodore Bragge himself. They form the introduction to his unwritten treatise on the 'Philosophy of Human Nature.' Meantime, he cheerfully undertook the search. He wrote on the third day that he had found a clue. On the sixth day he said they were following up the clue. On the tenth day he said, darkly, that other paths were opening, and that more money would be necessary. This was as exciting, if it should prove as unprofitable, as the search for the Philosopher's Stone. The partners, rejoicing in their secret, sent more money. 'It was,' said Augustus, 'trained intelligence against the brute force of advertising; and, in the long-run, trained intelligence must win.'

The man with the solid face received the money, and followed up his clues. Trained intelligence, acting on the decalogue of scientific maxims quoted above, quickly jumped at the conclusion that there never had been any marriage at all, which was not what the partners wanted. 'But we can find, perhaps, the young lady's mother She must have had a mother.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW STEPHEN SENT AN AMBASSADOR.

One evening, Stephen met Jack Baker, which was not unusual, at the club. They dined together. Jack's manner was mys-

terious. He whispered that he had something to communicate after dinner. He hurried through the meal with a haste quite unusual with him, and, as soon as possible, led Stephen into a little room, never used till much later in the evening, called the Strangers' card-room.

'Sit down, Hamblin.'

'What the deuce is the meaning of all this mystery, Jack?'

'This. They've found something.'

'What do you mean?'

Stephen turned pale.

'You know they have been advertising and offering rewards? Very well, then. Something has come out of it. A clerk of mine knows a clerk in Hamblin's. The clerks there are tremendously excited about the business. My man is to learn whatever goes on. He reports to-day that an old woman called and sent up her name in an envelope, saying she had come in answer to an advertisement.'

'Pooh!' said Stephen. 'What had she got to tell? I say there never was any marriage.'

'I say that possibly there was. How about false names? It's always the old women one has got to fear most. One must trust them: they know everything; they make up what they are not told: they never die, and they turn up at the wrong moment, just when they are not wanted, and let it all out. Hamblin, I wish I hadn't stood in with you.'

'Hang it, man! you are not afraid of your paltry thousand, are you?'

'Well, if you come to that, a thousand is a thousand, and it takes a mighty long time to make.'

'And you stand to win a thousand.'

'I want to know what this old woman had to tell,' Jack Baker went on doggedly.

'Man alive! Let the old woman go to the devil.'

But Stephen's cheek continued pale. He was not easy about that old woman. Had the men known that she was plain Mrs. Duncombe, once nurse to Alison, their apprehensions would have been calmed.

'Look here, old man,' said Jack, 'let us smooth matters a bit. Why not make it a friendly suit? Hang it! if I had a month's start I would prove a marriage somehow, if it was only a Scotch marriage.'

'Too late, Jack,' said Stephen. 'We have had one row. I got into a rage, and so did she. She's got a temper like mine—got it from her grandmother. These things very often pass over part of a generation. The temper passed over her father. She reminded me of my mother. Gad! what blazing rows we used to have in the old days!'

'Come, Hamblin. I will make a little compromise with you. Make it up, if you can, with the girl. If things go against you, you can then get my thousand out of her, with whatever you want for yourself. Your own affairs may be straighter then, no doubt.'

'Oh, my own affairs—yes—yes. They are pulling round,' said Stephen, forcing a smile.

'Very well, then. If the thing goes in your favour, you can let all the world see what a magnanimous creature you've been. Don't you see? If the worst happens, you can always reckon on getting a slice of the cake; if the best, then it will be all in your own hands, to do what you please with.'

'I think you are right,' said Stephen, with an effort. 'I am sure you are right, Jack. I ought never to have quarrelled with the little spitfire, but she would have it. We always did hate each other, you know. I wonder if she ever suspected what I knew. Perhaps she did. Girls are more crafty than anyone who doesn't know the nature of women would believe possible.'

He got up and found writing materials.

'I suppose it will be better to write to her than to call upon her. Yes, certainly better. I used to be able to pitch a very decent letter in the old days. Let me try my hand again.'

This letter took him some time to write. He wrote it, in fact, at least three times, and even then he was not satisfied with it. At last he brought the third draft to his friend, and submitted it for consideration.

'Listen, Jack,' he said. 'I think this will do as well as a longer letter. Of course, we shall keep a copy, and send one to the cousins.

'"My dear Alison,

'"I have for some time been trying to write to you. The memory of hard words, and perhaps bitter thoughts, on one or the other side, has hitherto prevented me. I have no desire to excuse myself. In fact, I can find no excuse. My unfortunate temper alone is to blame. To that, and to that alone, I would ascribe the misfortune that I have been made to appear to you in a light of hostility——"'

'Don't like that,' said Jack, slowly; 'say "made me assume, apparently, an attitude of hostility."'

'Think so? Yes. Perhaps that will be better.' Stephen made the correction in pencil. '"Made me assume an apparent attitude of hostility. Nothing, really, was farther from my thoughts, my wish, or my intention. Will you do me the justice of believing that I, for my own part, am most anxious, most desirous, to do my utmost to prove the truth, that you

may rely upon my most sincere co operation in any serious effort to ascertain the truth ; and that, in the discovery of any fact which may convince me, yourself, and our cousins of your title to the estate, I am ready to withdraw my claim at once. I beg you to believe that I should refuse to take any advantage of legal technicalities. At the same time, in justice to my own birth, to my position, to my brother's position, I ask that the truth should be fairly and fearlessly investigated. The future of the Hamblin House must not be open to the questions or the doubts of any who wish to throw a stone, or cast a slur. I am aware, very sorrowfully I own it, that the investigation which I ask—it is all I ask—may possibly prove disastrous to yourself. At all events, you are a Hamblin. You would not wish to be rich at the expense of others, whose right you were usurping ?

'"For the moment, I think I had better not attempt to see you. I send you this letter by the hand of a personal friend, Mr. Bunter Baker."'

'Hallo !' cried Jack ; 'I say, you don't mean me to take it ?'

'"Who will be able, I trust,"' Stephen read on quickly, '"to persuade you, as I, with my unhappy impetuosity, am unable to do, that I am a friend and not an enemy, that I am most anxious not to be regarded as an enemy. Sooner or later, this question, which in everybody's mind——"'

'I say,' said Jack, 'I suppose it isn't, really ?'

'No,' replied Stephen ; 'I don't suppose anybody outside the Hamblin lot troubles his head about it. But, you see, it has been very much in my head, which is the great thing. Where are we ?—"everybody's mind must have been raised. Was it not better that it should be raised by myself, in a spirit of inquiry, without animosity, or would you have preferred that it should be raised later on, perhaps when your children's fortunes might be blighted and their pride brought low ?"'

'That's devilish good,' said Jack.

'Yes ; I think I can manage the patter on occasion,' said Stephen. 'Well—"You will be told, perhaps, that my action in the case was dictated by a selfish desire to obtain, wrongfully, your inheritance. Alison, solemnly, that is not the case. It is quite the contrary. My first thought was in your interest, my first action was for your safety. You have to thank your friends, my cousins, and no others, for the turn that has been given to the thing. Read this carefully, and if you find any point or points of objection, do not be satisfied with the counsel of your present advisers, but have the courage and the confidence to ask explanations of me

'"Your affectionate uncle,

'"STEPHEN HAMBLIN."

And anyhow, it will show it is an act of kindness on my part. They will think I am not afraid. For that matter,' he added, with a dash of gasconade, 'I am not the least afraid. Let them do their level worst.'

'Level worst!' To bid a man do that is to throw the glove in earnest, and to throw it with the superiority of the better position. Jack Baker felt it. He was going as ambassador into the enemy's camp, not with the sneaking consciousness of defeat, but in the proud position of one who holds an olive-branch in one hand, and with the other invites the enemy to do his level worst. He forgot, for the moment, the mysterious old woman whose visit had disquieted him, and he only saw himself clothed in the grandeur of a plenipotentiary, dictating terms to a sulky and plain young woman, easily reduced to reason, and open, like most of her sex, to the influences of terror, respect, and awe, which are induced by the voice, and the presence, and the majesty of a Man!

In fact, Jack Baker, armed with this letter, did pay that visit the very next day. He went to Clapham Common in his own private hansom, hoping devoutly that Miss Hamblin might be sitting at the window when he drove to the door. Of course his horse was showy, and his tiger small. Of course, too, he was attired with the greatest magnificence permitted to City men by a very liberal fashion. No young fellow had more gold about him; no one wore better gloves; no one was more daring in the matter of neckties; no one more shiny of hat, neat of boot, or original in waistcoat. To men of this generation very few things are permitted in dress compared with what young men used to be allowed in the good old days when ribbons, lace, gorgeous doublets, slashed sleeves, pearl-embroidered pourpoint, silk stockings, sword-belt, sash, diamond buckles, and red-heeled shoes set off to advantage a young fellow who could boast a reasonably fine figure and shapely leg. Yet the present fashion allows something for the imagination to work upon; and the imagination of Jack Baker, which was not occupied with thoughts of heroic deed, brave saying, or generous emprise, naturally found employment in the invention of new braveries. He was still, though now past thirty, on that level of civilization where men take the same view of maidens as the peacock takes of the peahens, and imagine that, by spreading gorgeous plumage, and strutting with braggart air, they can awaken the admiration of the weaker sex.

He expected to be received by a small, timid girl, who might possibly show temper, but who would begin, at least, by being enormously afraid of him. This was unfortunate at the outset. He was unprepared, too, for the magnificence of the house, which surpassed anything of which he had ever dreamed. The

private houses of rich men and gentlemen were not, as a rule, thrown open to this successful speculator in silk. A club drawing-room was Jack's most exalted idea of a well-furnished apartment.

He was shown into the study, whither in a few moments Alison came to him. And then Jack's cheek paled, and his heart sank, for, instead of the insignificant and spiteful little animal he had dreamed of, the poor creature whom Stephen Hamblin generally spoke of as 'that little devil,' there stood before him a young lady, whose beauty, dignity, and self-possession overwhelmed him and crushed him.

She bowed and looked again at the card: 'Mr. J. Bunter Baker.' It is the day of double names. Smith is nothing unless he is differentiated by a pranomen other than the Christian name. Jones belongs to the Porkington Joneses. Jack Baker, as we have seen already, on arriving at success, remembered that he, too, had a second name, given him by his godfather, a most respectable clerk in a wholesale tea-warehouse. Mr. Bunter was now no more, but his name served to give his godson additional importance, and in his own eyes, at least, to elevate him in the social scale.

'"Mr. J. Bunter Baker,"' she repeated.

'I—I am Mr. Bunter Baker,' he replied.

Here he was so unlucky as to drop his hat, which, on recovering, he placed on the table.

'May I ask, Mr. Baker,' she went on, 'what is the meaning of your visit?'

'I come,' he replied, 'with a letter to you from Mr. Stephen Hamblin.'

'My uncle can have nothing to write to me,' said Alison, 'that I would wish to hear. I cannot receive any communications from him. Is that all you have to say to me?'

Jack Baker began to wish he had not consented to act as ambassador. But he plucked up courage.

'My friend, Miss Hamblin,' he said, 'who is a gentleman of extraordinary sensitive nature, as perhaps you know, has been rendered extremely unhappy by the position in which he finds himself unavoidably placed towards you.'

'Why!' cried Alison, 'he has deliberately insulted the memory and character of my father. Unavoidably?'

'There were reasons, Miss Hamblin,' Jack went on, trying to speak grandly, 'why he was bound to go on against his wish. Had his cousins listened to him at the outset, there would have been probably no publicity—no litigation.'

'I know nothing of any motives,' said Alison; 'I judge only by his actions. My uncle is my enemy. I want to have no com-

munication of any kind with him. I mistrust him, and I suspect him.'

'At least, you will read his letter?' Jack produced it, and tendered it with a winning smile. But Alison was very far from thinking of his manner of smiling. 'Do not let me go away and tell my friend, Mr. Stephen Hamblin, that you refused to receive a letter from him, even after I told you that it was conciliatory.'

'Conciliatory!' she echoed, 'as if I did not well to be angry. Well, sir, I will read your letter.'

She took it, and sat down without inviting her visitor to take a chair, which was rude. Jack, therefore, remained standing. He felt conscious that he was not looking to advantage. To stand without your hat in your hands, without the aid even of an umbrella or walking-stick, before a lady, while she reads a letter, makes one feel like a schoolboy about to say a lesson which he does not know.

'He offers,' says Alison, 'to withdraw his claim, as soon as anything has been discovered which will convince him that he is wrong. That is very noble in him, considering that we shall force him to withdraw as soon as that has been discovered. Why did he write me this letter, sir? You say you are his friend. Have you seen the letter?'

'I have. I think it is a most friendly letter. Nothing could be more so, I am sure; most creditable to the writer.'

'Thank you. Why did he write it?'

'Pure good feeling,' said Jack. 'He is a man of wonderful good feeling; that, when you come to think of it, is his strong point.'

'Why did he write it?' asked Alison again, but this time of herself; 'what does he expect to get by writing it?'

'What can he get?' said the ambassador, craftily. 'He knows very well that the estate is as good as his own already. He wants to make friends with you.'

'I am much obliged to him,' replied Alison; 'I can never be friends with him. He is, and will always be, my most bitter enemy. My only hope is that I may never again see him, never again speak to him.'

'Now that's very hard,' said Jack. 'And what is the good of standing in your own light? Why, I look on this letter—though he didn't say so, mind, and it's entirely between you and me, and not to go any farther'—he really, Alison thought, was a most vulgar young man—'as the foundation of a friendly arrangement.'

'I will consent to no friendly arrangement.'

'We will suppose for a moment,' continued Jack, gradually feeling his way, 'that my friend Mr. Stephen Hamblin is

anxious to put an end to this unnatural contest between two very near relations.'

'It is very easy for him to put an end to it,' said Alison; 'he has only to withdraw his pretensions. He has only to cease insulting my father's memory.'

'Pardon me. That is not at all his intention or his object. You are a lady, Miss Hamblin, and you do not feel, as men do, the necessity of securing for every man his right. Prove your right, and Stephen Hamblin retires. Until you do, he is the heir-at-law. But'—he raised his finger, for Alison was going to burst in with an indignant denial—'suppose that he was to meet you half-way. Suppose that he was ready to say, "Let us arrange this dispute. Let your friends agree upon a present settlement for you. Let me succeed without opposition: I shall not marry; you will be my sole heiress." Now, could anything be more agreeable and comfortable for all parties?'

Alison rose.

'This is quite idle,' she said grandly; 'I will make no such arrangement.'

Jack Baker confessed to himself on the spot, that all his previously conceived ideas of feminine beauty would have to be modified. He had never seen anyone at all comparable with this magnificently beautiful creature on the stage, which, in common with many young City men, he confidently believed to be the natural home and harbour of the highest types of English beauty; nor behind the bar, where those fair ones who cannot play burlesques delight to display their loveliness for all to behold who possess the 'price of half a pint.' Nor could any music-hall in London show such a face, such deep black eyes, such splendid black hair, such lips, such a warm rosy cheek, such a figure. It was a new lesson for him; he felt an unaccustomed glow about the pericardium; a yearning all over; a consciousness of higher things than he had as yet imagined; a sudden weariness of Topsy and Lottie, and their drink-dispensing friends: he choked; he blushed; he stammered; he was penetrated with the majesty of a beauty far beyond his dreams; he was so deeply struck with the shock of this revelation that he actually forgot himself and his own peacockery. Then he suddenly remembered his mission.

'Surely,' he pleaded, with a last effort, 'surely it would be better to come to an arrangement than to carry on a long and fruitless opposition. It can't do anybody good: nothing will come of it, except disappointment. All this time they've been searching and advertising, and offering rewards—and what's come? Nothing.'

He puts this out as a feeler, but Alison's face showed no change, so that he was sure nothing had been found.

'Not the least discovery, has there now?'

She did not reply.

'Why, if we could have a little agreement come to, all your troubles would stop at once.'

'No, sir,' said Alison. 'On the contrary, all the trouble would begin. You cannot understand, I suppose, that my father's honour is dear to me. My Uncle Stephen cannot understand. Nothing, nothing!'—she stamped with her foot and looked so resolute that Jack trembled—'nothing would ever persuade me to sacrifice the good name of my father. I will make no such bargain as you suggest. I would rather, believe me, sir, I would far rather go out from this house a beggar.'

Her black eyes burned with so fierce a light, and her lips were set so firm after she said this, that the ambassador felt singularly small.

'In that case,' he said, 'I have nothing more to say. You quite understand that this last proposal is my own suggestion, not Mr. Hamblin's, though I am quite satisfied of his desire to be on good terms with his niece and to benefit her.'

'That I do not believe,' said Alison. 'Good-morning, sir.'

She looked superb. Jack Baker thought of his own balance at the bank and his ventures on the high seas, and took heart.

'In any case, Miss Hamblin,' he said, with an ingratiating smile, 'I am not my principal in this affair, and I hope you will not consider me as rowing in the same boat with him. Of course, I can hardly discuss his conduct with you, as he is my friend. But I cannot, I am sure, regret it, since it has enabled me to introduce myself to a young lady who—I must say—who——' Here he broke down, because she stared at him with cold and wondering eyes. 'And I hope, Miss Hamblin, that when we meet in the City—I mean in the streets, and in society, and at dinners, and so on, that you will let me consider myself a friend. And if I might be permitted to call again——'

'Sir!' The tone of her voice froze him. 'I have already wished you good-morning. Stay! you may tell your principal, as you call him, that I have torn up his letter.'

She did so, in fact. No actress on the stage ever did a little piece of business more effectively, because it was done so quietly.

The fragments of the letter lay at his feet.

'Humph!' said Jack, doubtfully. 'Well, we've taken the precaution to keep a copy. That will be proof of our intentions. *Good*-morning, Miss Hamblin;' he bowed in his very best style. 'I would meet with another failure, willingly, for the pleasure of seeing you again.'

He smiled his sweetest, while she looked at him in speechless indignation. What did the man mean? When she had found

some words in which to express her sense of his impertinence, he was gone.

'Now,' murmured Jack the experienced, 'if it was any of the bar lot, I should understand that standoffishness. I'm up to *their* gag, anyhow. They'd like to get the chance of Mr. J. Bunter Baker, wouldn't they? Just. But with a bit o' muslin like this Hamblin girl, I suppose it's different. Perhaps I took her a little aback at first, though she can't really mean that she don't want to see me again. Gad! that's too ridiculous. A girl's a girl, all the world over. And it must be mighty dull down here, all by herself. I'll find another opportunity and call again. Give her line for a bit, J. double-B.'

He sought the shelter of his cab, and drove back to town, seeking solace for his wounded heart in cigars. And in the evening he met Stephen at the club, and they dined together. Jack was radiant and boisterous.

'By Jupiter Omnipotent and Christopher Columbus!' he cried, in an ecstasy. 'You never told me what she is like—that niece of yours, Hamblin. Kept it for a surprise. She's splendid, she is: she's magnificent: she's a goddess, that's what she is. Hang me if she isn't a goddess! And you to call that gorgeous creature a little devil! Little? why, she's five feet eight if she's an inch. And her face, and her figure! Come, Hamblin, I can make allowance for the feelings of a man who has anyone standing between him and such an almighty pile; but "little devil"—I say—it really *is*— Here, waiter!' this young man habitually bawled as loudly in a club dining-room as he had been accustomed to do in City shilling dining-places years before. 'Waiter, come here. Bring me a bottle of Perrier Jouet sec—not the Très sec. It's the least I can do for her, to drink her health in Perrier Jouet.'

'I suppose uncles are not expected to fall in love with their nieces,' said Stephen, carelessly. 'I never said that Alison was ugly or small.'

'You called her a little devil, that's all I know. Well, old man, here's her jolly good health and a lover, and I shouldn't mind if it was me, J. double-B., yours truly.'

'Well'—Stephen listened with natural impatience to this enthusiasm—'well, how did you get on, and what did she say?'

'No use, my boy, thinking of anything friendly in that quarter. But keep your copy of the letter, which may be useful later on. I did my best for you: I said you were a man of the most sensitive feelings—ho! ho!—and I said that you were most unhappy about the position you had been obliged to assume—ha! ha! Might just as well have tried the hostile line, because she's as savage as she is beautiful. She will want a man, not a thread-paper, for a husband, that girl. J. double-B. would

about meet the case, I think. By the way, I found out one thing; whoever the old woman was who called at their office, they haven't made any discovery yet.'

'If she won't be friendly, she needn't,' said Stephen. 'Anyhow, I've done the regular thing, and it will be worse for her in the long-run. Let her go to——'

'No, Hamblin; don't couple any more the name of such an angelic creature with that of the devil. I wonder what you were like before the thatch came off your pretty brows? She reminded me of you at once. Here's her health again, and if there was any better wine in the club, I would drink it in that.'

'She takes after my mother, the Señora,' said Stephen. 'All the Hamblins are like each other; but she has got her grandmother's complexion, like me. She can't help being like me, though she would rather not, I dare say. Let her go, Jack.'

News came, presently, to the cousinhood that Stephen had written a letter, and had hinted at an arrangement. The family were divided in opinion. For while some thought that Alison showed the proper Hamblin spirit in rejecting all overtures short of absolute submission, others thought that perhaps she had no right to possess any portion of the Hamblin spirit at all, until 'things' were proved; so that, in fact, the refusal to make any compromise was a sort of impertinence in her. Undoubtedly the feeling was growing stronger in the family that Stephen was very likely right. Gilbert Yorke, however, agreed with Alison that a compromise was an impossibility. It was remarkable, considering that she was so resolute never to marry unless her father's name was cleared, how Alison comforted and guided herself by the opinion of this young man.

But his vision of perfect beauty abided with Jack Baker, so that he began to feel how conversation at bars, admiration of actresses, talk about ballet people, might all lose their charm, compared with the society of the one perfect woman he had ever seen. Perhaps it was as well for Gilbert Yorke's tranquillity that he could not tell how this rising young City merchant thought more about Alison than his speculations, more about her deep dark eyes than about his silks

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW MISS NETHERSOLE BECAME AN INSTRUMENT.

Now while Gilbert and Alderney Codd were floundering in the dark, groping here and there with uncertain steps and finding nothing; while Mr. Theodore Bragge was 'following up' one clue after another, and asking continually for more cheques; while Nicolas was hugging to his bosom the new and delightful secret with which he intended one day to make such a *coup* as would make the ears of them who heard of it tingle, and set the hearts of all boys, wherever the English tongue is spoken, aflame; while the partners were doubtful and despondent; while the cousins daily became as uncertain over the event as the English public once were over the identity of a certain claimant, Miss Nethersole, this time an instrument without knowing it, voluntarily communicated the very fact which they were all anxious to find.

We have seen how this lady, her enemy being dead, and her lawyer stubbornly refusing to ask for the indictment of a dead man, betook herself to her country villa, and sat down to enjoy comfortably the settled gloom which may arise in woman's heart equally from love, disappointment, or the baffling of revenge. The forgeries were put away with her plate in a box which for greater safety she kept screwed to the floor under her own bed. And for a time she submitted herself to the inevitable, and tried to be resigned under the Ruling which had torn her enemy from her grasp.

You cannot, to be sure, execute any revenge upon a dead man which shall have the true flavour about it. You may—as many great monarchs, *gourmets* in revenge, have done—hang up the limbs, cut into neat joints, upon gibbets, or stick them on pikes, or paint them beautifully with tar, and then sling them up with chains on a gibbet to dangle in the wind; and yet, after all, nothing satisfies. You may gaze with pleasure on the gallows-tree, but there is always the uneasy feeling that the man himself, who has joined the majority, may be laughing at you all the while. Miss Nethersole would perhaps have liked, could she be persuaded that it was a Christian thing, to have decorated Temple Bar with Anthony Hamblin in bits. I mean that her bitterness was so savage, so deeply rooted, that she would have caught at any chance of satisfying the hunger of her soul. She was a woman who, on this subject, was raging.

This man had robbed her of her sister, and of her money. Worse than that, he had robbed her of her heart. She was no older than he. When he came to Newbury she was still young, two-and-thirty or so ; he was handsome ; he was gentle in his manner, courteous and attentive ; she had not had many opportunities of meeting such a gallant gentleman, this daughter of a successful Nonconformist tradesman : she mistook his politeness for something more real, and because he was deferent and courteous, she thought he was in love. She was not hard-featured in those days, nor hard-minded ; the honey in her nature still predominated over the vinegar ; and although her oval face was rather thin, and her chin a little pointed, she was not yet without womanly charms. It was not absurd for her to suppose that she might be loved by man—when is it so late as to be absurd ? She was deceived in the most cruel way, she said. The man began by making love to her, and then came and asked for her sister—this chit of eighteen, more than a dozen years younger than himself. That wrong, though she did not say so, was harder to forgive than the other two. Money she might be robbed of ; she might even lose her sister, and yet in time get over both those losses. But the contempt of herself, the quiet way in which the man, when he at length comprehended her interpretation of his suit, put it aside courteously, and yet as if it were absurd—these were things which could never be forgotten.

Twenty years ago ? Why, the whole scene was as fresh in her mind as if it had been yesterday. Twenty years ago ? Why it seemed not a week since ; when the man left her, she locked the door and gave way to that fit of despairing wrath and sorrow which had been ever afterwards the great sin of her life to look back upon, and yet it was not repented.

Seeing, therefore, the manifest impossibility of getting any pleasantness out of revenge upon a dead man, Miss Nethersole at first collapsed altogether : nor was it till many weeks afterwards that a thought came to her which went straight to her very heart and remained there, growing daily stronger, and taking every day more definite shape. Why, she thought, should she lose the money she had paid on the forged receipts ? There were six of them. Their dates were twenty, nineteen, down to fifteen years old. Each one was worth, at compound interest, more than double the amount it represented. Say only double. There was a sum of two thousand pounds, at least, waiting for her. She had only to ask it. That meant an increase to her income of eighty pounds a year. Surely it would be a flying in the face of Providence, and a despising of gifts, were that sum suffered to be lost or thrown into the capacious coffers of the Hamblins.

And then, by going to the office of the firm, by merely claiming it, she would be able to inform the family of the deceased forger what manner of man the head of the House had been.

'It is a Christian duty,' she said, persuading herself.

Perhaps it was; but it took her several weeks before she could resolve on actually carrying the project into execution. Finally, she arrived at the desired pitch of resolution, and came up to town by herself, bringing her precious *pièces de conviction* with her.

She consulted her solicitor, but more as a matter of form, because she expected little of a low-spirited caitiff who had refused to ask the magistrates for a warrant because the criminal was dead. She was right. He behaved in the meanest manner possible; there was nothing vigorous about the man. After all, as she found afterwards, he was only a member of the Establishment. What could be expected from a hanger on to that dry branch?

'The man is dead,' said this creature of compromises. 'You can have no revenge out of him. You cannot even prove, after this lapse of time, that the papers are written by him. Even if the first part, the form of receipt, was written by him, you cannot prove that the signature is his. To me the signature looks genuine. The money was paid over the counter. Who is to say, after fourteen years, who received it? All the good you will get, Miss Nethersole, by proceeding in this ungrateful and thankless business, will be the character of a vindictive woman.'

'What does that matter,' she replied, 'provided I can show him to the world as he was?'

She looked thinner, harder, more determined than ever. The death of the enemy, the solicitor thought, had only intensified her desire for revenge.

'Just so,' said the man of law. 'But suppose you only succeed in showing him to the world as the world has always accepted him, and in showing yourself as a revengeful person endeavouring by every means, fair or foul, to compass the disgrace of an honourable name?'

She closed her thin lips more tightly together.

'I am vindictive,' she said; 'I am revengeful, because I wish to vindicate the memory of my sister——'

'By blackening the memory of her husband. Pardon me, Miss Nethersole; but I am unable to enter into those curious subtleties, by which you distinguish the duties of a Christian from that of the avenger of a blood-feud. I cannot act for you in this matter. I must, I fear, request you to find another solicitor. I wish you a good-morning.'

Miss Nethersole closed her black bag with a snap and went

away. But she was not vanquished. A woman who has lived and acted herself for thirty years is not to be moved out of her course by the disapproval of a solicitor.

What did she want with a solicitor? She could very well act alone; she knew what she had to do, and she could do it, she thought, better without a lawyer's aid than with one. Acting alone, too, she could act quickly.

She was staying at the Queen's Hotel, St. Martin's le Grand, a central place, well removed from the soul-destroying gaieties of the West, and within access of several faithful chapels. She returned to the room, sat down for awhile to collect her thoughts, and presently, after a cup of tea, which brought back her courage together with her vindictiveness, she made hard her upper lips, and set out for Great St. Simon Apostle. It was then five o'clock in the afternoon. The clerks were putting things together; the porters and servants were yawning, expectant of the close of day; the two partners, Augustus and William, were talking together in the room of the former, hats on and umbrellas in hand ready to go, when Miss Nethersole's card was brought in by a clerk in waiting.

'Miss Rachel Nethersole, OlivetLodge,' read Augustus. 'Do you know her, Cousin William?'

The man of few words shook his head.

'Nor I. Ask her, Jennings, what she wants, and whether to-morrow will do? Another of the replies to our advertisements, I suppose, William, or perhaps a messenger from Mr. Bragge. That man means work, mind you.'

Miss Nethersole sent up word that to-morrow would not do, and that if the partners refused to hear what she had to say to them confidentially, she would send up the purport of her message by word of mouth, a course which she advised them not to adopt.

'This is a very curious message,' said Augustus. 'It looks like threatening us, William. Is she a young woman, Jennings?'

'Oh dear, sir, no! Not at all. She looks more than fifty. A lady dressed in black, with a black bag.'

'Very odd,' said Augustus, 'extremely odd. Perhaps she is the sister of a young lady who disappeared thirty years ago, a mother—no—that can hardly be.' Augustus glanced at the card. 'Show her up, Jennings. Perhaps she is only a person connected with schools, or guilds, or nunneries, or societies of some kind, in search of donations, which she shall not get.'

'Certainly not,' said William the Silent.

She was not, however, connected with any begging enterprise whatever, as she quickly showed. She entered the room, looked round, and glared upon the partners in silence.

'Pray, madam,' asked Augustus, 'will you be kind enough to tell us how we can serve you?'

'You cannot serve me.'

Then will you be kind enough to tell us what gives us the pleasure of seeing you here?'

'It is no pleasure at all, either for you or for me.'

'Really! Then will you please tell us, at once, who you are?'

'I am your late cousin Anthony Hamblin's sister-in-law.'

Both the partners started, and gazed at her with curiosity.

'His sister-in-law? Then you must be—you must be the sister of his wife?' cried Augustus, considering rapidly the meaning of the relationship. 'Permit us, my dear Miss Nethersole, to make your acquaintance, to shake hands with you. This is my partner and cousin, Mr. William Hamblin. Anthony's sister-in-law. Good heavens! The very person, or next to the very person, whom we have been trying to find for so long. Are you really aware, madam, how much depends on the proof of this marriage? Really, this is—this is—this is Providential. Pray, pray, Miss Nethersole, take a chair—pray sit down and let us converse! Most Providential, I am sure!'

She obeyed, and sat down. But her eyes were not encouraging. They showed no inclination to respond to the friendly advances of her brother's cousins.

'I do not understand compliments. I come to——'

'We have been hunting everywhere.' Augustus went on, 'to find out whom Anthony married. *I* assure you, Miss Nethersole, we have spared no trouble. May I ask, did you come in answer to our advertisements, or did Mr. Bragge——'

'Neither, she replied surlily; 'and as for marriage, he married my sister Dora.'

'He married her sister Dora?' echoed Augustus; 'he married Miss Dora Nethersole, Cousin William, of—of—of—what town, madam?'

'Of Newbury in Wiltshire.'

'Of Newbury in Wiltshire,' he repeated. 'Of course, of Newbury in Wiltshire—we are getting on famously. Why, Miss Nethersole, you have been of more use to us in five minutes than all our advertisements, and circulars, and secret service people, in four months. Anthony Hamblin was married to Dora, Miss Dora Nethersole, of Newbury in Wiltshire. Were you yourself present at the marriage, madam? But of course you were. No doubt you were a bridesmaid.'

'Of course I was not. Mr. Hamblin preferred to elope with my sister. That was his idea of Christian Wedlock. He carried her away with him. Naturally, I never saw her again.'

'But you know that they were married? You have proof

that they were married? You can tell us where they were married?'

'Sir!' Her voice was more than severe. 'Do I *know* that they were married? Know that they were *married?* You are speaking of my sister—my sister, sir.'

'That is the reason why I say that you have, no doubt, proof of the marriage. You know where it took place, for instance.'

'That is not what I came to speak about,' she replied. 'It is clear to me that your cousin Anthony Hamblin was even more wicked than I believed him to be. It seems now that he hid this marriage from you, his partners.' She looked as if this additional proof of wickedness gratified her beyond measure.

'Pardon me,' said Augustus, 'he did tell us, later on, of his marriage; he informed us that your sister, his wife, was dead. He did not wish to speak of his wife, whose early death, doubtless, was too recent a sorrow, and we respected his silence. There is no wickedness there, so far as I can understand. You, of course, have no reason to conceal the fact of the marriage. Where did it take place?'

'I do not know,' said Miss Nethersole, simply.

'You do not know?' Both partners stared blankly. 'You do not know?'

'I do not!' She pulled the strings of her black bag impatiently. 'They eloped.'

'Oh!' cried Augustus. 'They eloped, did they? Can you understand this, William?'

The taciturn partner shook his head. Anthony Hamblin elope! As well expect an archbishop to elope.

'They eloped,' she went on, and my sister wrote next day to say that she was married. It was not my business to ask where or when. She had left me, and was no more my sister.'

'Where did she write from?'

'From a place called Lulworth, in Dorsetshire.'

Augustus Hamblin made a note of the place, and waited for more information.

'As for the reasons why Anthony Hamblin concealed his marriage,' Miss Nethersole went on, 'I think I can find you, at least, six. They are here.'

She opened her bag and drew forth a little bundle of papers, carefully tied up.

From the bundle she extracted half-a-dozen documents, all written on half sheets of note-paper, and on one side. She selected one and handed it across the table to Augustus.

'Have the goodness to read that,' she said.

Augustus read:

Received, this day, January the first, 18——, of Messrs.

Child and Company, the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds sterling.

'£150 0s. 0d.

'DORA HAMBLIN.'

The signature, in a sloping Italian hand, ran across a receipt stamp.

'Very well,' said Augustus, returning the paper, 'there is nothing remarkable about a stamped and signed receipt.'

'Read the next,' she said.

It was the same as the first, but dated a year later.

She gave him a third, a fourth, and up to an eighth. Augustus read them all, handed them to his cousin, who also read them, and gave them back to Miss Nethersole.

'You looked at the dates?' she asked, with a wintry smile. The moment of her triumph, such as it was, was about to begin.

'We did.'

'I paid that hundred and fifty pounds to my sister for eight long years,' she said. 'It was my allowance to her. Her husband starved her, while he took the allowance.'

'Anthony Hamblin starved his wife?'

'He neglected her, and starved her. He was a murderer, because she died of his neglect.'

'Good heavens!' cried Augustus; 'do you know what you are saying?'

'He was more than a murderer; because while my sister died less than two years after her marriage, these drafts were drawn by him, and the signatures forged, for six years later.'

'Let me look at them again,' said Augustus, with troubled face.

She handed them across the table, but one by one. They were all in the same handwriting, except the signature. After examining them once more, with greater care, Augustus rose and opened his private safe; from this he extracted a book, full of letters and papers pasted in, and carefully indexed. He turned over the leaves, found what he wanted, and laid it before his partner, and one of Miss Nethersole's receipts beside it, without saying a word.

William looked, compared, nodded.

Augustus returned the receipt.

'Thank you, Miss Nethersole,' he said; 'we are satisfied that your statement is correct. The papers are forged.'

'Anthony Hamblin was the forger.'

'Pardon me; that is quite another affair. How are you going to prove that?'

'How am I going to prove that?' she sat bolt upright and stared him full in the face. 'Did I not pay the money?'

'Doubtless it was paid for you! but *who received it?*

'Who should, except Anthony Hamblin himself?'

'But you forget, or perhaps you do not know, that Anthony Hamblin at that time was in the enjoyment of at least twenty thousand pounds a year.'

Rachel Nethersole was staggered.

'Twenty thousand pounds a year? and he refused my sister more than two pounds a week! And when I saw him last, and taxed him with the crime, he did not deny it. I went to Clapham on purpose to see him: it was the day before he was drowned. I showed him these papers. I informed him that my purpose was to prosecute him criminally. He did not, he could not, deny his guilt; he had not the impudence to deny it, though he tried to brazen it out.'

'He did not deny it?'

'No; on the contrary, he implored me to pause. He said that consequences, of which I knew nothing, but which I should regret all my life, would follow if I persevered. I left him unrepentant, yet troubled. In this awful attitude of convicted guilt, he was called away the next day.'

'This is the most extraordinary statement I ever heard,' said Augustus. 'We do not disbelieve you, Miss Nethersole, but we are convinced that you are mistaken. Anthony Hamblin could not have acknowledged his guilt.'

'He did not say, in so many words, "I did forge those signatures,' it is true,' said Miss Nethersole; 'but he acknowledged that he had done it by implication. What did he mean by saying that I did not understand the consequences which would follow?'

'I do not know,' said Augustus. 'Come, Miss Nethersole, you have clearly been defrauded of this money. It matters nothing, now, whether this dead man did the thing or not. We feel certain that he did not. You will keep your own conclusions.'

'Certainly: that the forger was Anthony Hamblin.' She nodded, and set her thin lips firm.

'As you please. I think my partner agrees with me that we ought to buy back these receipts.'

'At compound interest,' said the lady.

'At compound interest. We are ready to buy them of you to prevent a scandal. We cannot allow our late partner and cousin to be accused or suspected of such a crime. Besides, there are others to consider. We will buy those papers of you, Miss Nethersole.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'Of course the money will be useful to me. It is a large sum to lose. At the same time, if I give

up the papers I give up the proofs of that man's abominable perfidy and wickedness.'

'Not at all,' Augustus replied. 'These papers are not proofs at all. You would find it as impossible to prove that it was he who drew the money as that it was he who forged the signatures.'

She was silent, but not convinced. She rose, and put the papers back into her bag.

'I will not sell them, then,' she said. 'I will keep them. You would not want to buy them unless it was to screen your late partner. You are deceiving me; I shall keep them, and I shall bide my time.'

'We are not deceiving you, Miss Nethersole. Remember, however, that our offer is always open. We will buy the papers whenever you please to sell them.'

'Then I will go,' she said, 'as I came. At least, you know the truth.'

'One moment,' said Augustus. 'We may wish to correspond with you. Your address is on this card—Olivet Lodge, Newbury. That will always find you? Thank you. It occurs to me—perhaps a foolish doubt—that while you were not informed of your sister's place of marriage, you were wrongly informed of her death.'

'No,' said Miss Nethersole. 'There, at least, I am on firm ground. Because I have seen her grave. She is buried in Bournemouth cemetery. At her head is a cross with her initials, "D. H.," and the date of her escape from the tyranny and neglect of a SEDUCER, a LIAR, a FORGER, and a THIEF!'

She shook all over with the vehemence of her wrath. Then she gathered up her bag and her umbrella, laid over her arm the black shawl which completed her costume, and which she always carried as if she were a waiter and the shawl a napkin, and went away without a word of adieu, slamming the door after her.

'What a woman!' cried Augustus, with a sigh of relief. 'And now, William, what are we to make of it?'

'No doubt about the handwriting,' said William.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW ALISON REMEMBERED A MANUSCRIPT.

RACHEL NETHERSOLE was gone, and the partners, left alone, held long and serious counsel. It seemed best, on the whole, to

send for Gilbert Yorke and tell him everything, except one thing, which the cousins kept to themselves, the secret of the handwriting. Mr. Theodore Bragge was busy 'following up a clue' of his own. In fact, he was at the moment exchanging ideas on current politics with a friend in a Fleet Street tavern. Alderney Codd, the most diligent of workers, was hunting down strange Hamblins, no relations at all, into queer dens and cribs, where they generally assailed him with demands of *backsheesh*. Gilbert Yorke was the most trustworthy agent, and they sent for him and told him all that they had learned from Miss Nethersole.

'What we have actually learned,' said Augustus, is the name of Anthony's wife, the statement made by her of an actual marriage, the place where she lived, and the place and date of her death. It will be your duty to visit these places, to find out anything that can be learned further; and, if possible, to ascertain the place of marriage, whether under a false name or not. Should you like Alderney Codd to go with you, or instead of you?'

The young man blushed ingenuously. Should he surrender to Alderney Codd any portion of the glory and pride of recovering Alison's name?

'There is another thing. Miss Nethersole does not seem to know that there was any issue of the marriage. You may call upon her after your investigations, and tell her of the child, of Alison. You will find her bitter against the memory of Anthony, and she will show you some receipts. I think that Yorke should know about the receipts?' He turned to his partner, who nodded. 'She gave her sister a sum of a hundred and fifty pounds a year; the sister died two years after marriage; the money was drawn for eight years.'

'But not by Mr. Hamblin.'

'Certainly not,' Augustus replied with decision, 'certainly not. The receipts are forgeries, but the forging is not his; of that you may, if you please—but use your own judgment in the matter—assure Miss Nethersole.'

'I may tell Alison?'

Augustus Hamblin hesitated.

'Use your own judgment there as well,' he said at length; 'but she is to tell no one, not even Mrs. Cridland.'

This permission granted, Gilbert hastened to Clapham Common with his news. Here, indeed, was a clue. Let Mr. Theodore Bragge follow up his clues; let Alderney Codd run down one Hamblin after another: he had the name of the wife; he knew where she was buried. Alison's mother was found.

He found her in the garden among the flowers; it was a quiet morning in very early June. The lilacs and laburnums were

still in full blossom: the earlier and old-fashioned flowers—the wall-flowers, London-pride, polyanthus, columbine—were in their first pride and glory: the turf was crisp and fresh. The garden was quiet, young Nick having not yet returned from school. Not far off a man was sharpening something on a wheel, and the monotonous sound made one think of the road-side and the country. Overhead, larks sang; in the trees there was a blackbird, a thrush, and a chiff-chaff, besides all sorts of other songsters—a whole choir of songsters, as Addison would have called them.

'You here, and so early, Gilbert?' Alison cried, as her lover sprang across the lawn to greet her.

'Yes, Alison; I have news for you—good news, my dear—the best news—the news you have long wanted to hear.'

'Gilbert!'—she clutched his arm with her two hands; her cheek was very pale, but her lips were firm—'you know what I want most. Is it—is it *that?*'

'It is, Alison. Courage, dear; we have but one step to take, and all will be cleared up. Meantime, we are certain—mind, we are certain—for we have found your mother.'

'My mother,' she murmured, with a strange smile; 'what does not that mean to most girls? But to me it means more—for it means my father, too.'

'We know,' said Gilbert, 'that he was married; we have his wife's statement to that effect, the day after they eloped. Yes—one reason why your father wished to keep the marriage secret was, I suppose, because it was a runaway marriage; and why it was runaway, I cannot tell you. I am going to-day to visit your mother's grave.'

'My mother's grave,' she repeated, her dark eyes filling with tears; 'where is it, Gilbert? Surely I may go along with you?'

Why should she not? But it was at Bournemouth.

'Mrs. Duncombe will come with me,' Alison went on. 'I can be ready in half an hour. Let me go with you, Gilbert!'

Her preparations took her less than half an hour, and they had time to talk before they started for the train.

'Are you happier, dear Alison?' asked Gilbert.

'Yes,' she said; 'at least, I feel as if I am going to be happier. My faith has been sorely tried, at times, Gilbert. The sky has been dark indeed. I have had sometimes to school myself not to think of him as dishonoured, and yet I have never been able to think of him as dead. It always seems as if one day—some day—the old familiar step will be heard in the hall, and I shall be in his arms again.'

Her eyes filled again with the tears that were now so ready to spring.

'And you know, Alison, what this discovery means to me?'

'Hush, Gilbert! I know,' she said, with her sweet grave way, 'I know, but I must not think of those things now. I have to restore my father's name, to show my cousins, those who would persuade me to make a compromise, that he was no hypocrite, skulking behind a fair reputation. That is what I must think about for the present—that, and the memory of my unknown mother.'

'She is known now,' said Gilbert. 'Your mother is known; you shall stand beside her grave; you shall see her sister.'

'Who is her sister?' asked Alison, with sudden interest. A dead mother whom she could not remember was like some pale and sorrowful shade of the past, to be contemplated with pity, but yet without suffering; but a mother's sister—that was tangible; that was something to bring home to her the reality of a mother. Perhaps, as she was now, so her mother might have been, in the old time. 'Who is her sister?' she asked.

'Her name is Miss Rachel Nethersole,' said he. 'What is the matter, Alison?'

For the girl started to her feet with a cry.

'Rachel Nethersole!' she repeated; 'Olivet Lodge? She is the lady who called the night before—it happened—while we were all singing. Do you remember, Gilbert? Ah! no. You would not have noticed it. They brought a card to him, which he dropped when he went out to see her. I picked it up, and gave to him afterwards. Her visit troubled him. He said she revived old and painful memories—they must have been those of his married life and early loss. No wonder he was sad next morning, and strange in his manner.'

'Only the night before?' asked Gilbert. 'And she has never been here since?'

'Never; but I remember—oh, Gilbert, how foolish I have been!—that when my father went away he left a manuscript on the table, which she had given him. I took it, and laid it in my own desk, and I forgot all about it till this moment. Wait! it may tell us all that we want to know.'

She ran upstairs, and opened her desk, which was full of the little things accumulated by the girl in her progress through life: photographs of her friends, mementoes of the places she had visited, the elementary jewels of her childhood, the silver crosses and little golden lockets given her by her father. Lying on the top of all these things there was the manuscript. As she took it out, her finger caught in a string, and drew out with the paper a little red coral necklace. It was the one thing which connected her with babyhood, the one ornament which Mrs. Duncombe had found upon her neck when Mr. Hamblin brought her, a child of two years old, to Brighton. The necklace, too,

was old, and some of the beads were broken. It could not have been bought for her, a baby. She carried downstairs both manuscript and coral.

'Here is the manuscript,' she said. 'It is marked "Private," but you may read it. And see—here is the one thing which I have received from my mother. You may take it, to show my aunt—Miss Nethersole.'

Gilbert took both, and placed them in his pocket.

'If these are secrets,' he said, 'they shall be safely kept by me. There can be nothing of which your father has cause to be ashamed.'

He spoke stoutly, but he had misgivings. What was the meaning of this sudden melancholy, caused by a simple visit from his dead wife's sister? And what were the contents of the paper headed 'Private and Confidential'?

Whatever they were, he put them away for the present. They could wait. Meantime he was going to travel with Alison: to sit beside her for three short hours, to see her for the first time since the day of disaster bright and animated, to find great joy for himself, in the fact that it was himself who had been the messenger of glad tidings. Gilbert was only five-and-twenty or so, he was in love, and since the fatal fourth of January there had been no passages of love possible, only protestations on the maiden's part that unless she could bring her lover an unsullied name, she would never come to him at all. These protestations did not present love in its most cheerful and most favourable aspect.

Mrs. Duncombe was good enough to drop off into a comfortable and easy sleep in her own corner. She was a lady who 'did' with a good deal of sleep; the rumble of the carriage soothed her; and there was a young man with her young lady to take good care of her.

He did; he took such good care of her that he held her by the hand the whole way; he never lost sight of her face for a moment, and he had so much to say that long before he came to the end of his confidences the train had left Southampton far behind, and was running through the green glades of the New Forest; past the hoary oaks and stretches of coarse grass where the ponies find a rude and rough pasture; past rural stations planted lonely among the coppice; past the wild hills and barren heaths of Ringwood; past the stately minster of Christ Church, and gliding softly into the station of Bournemouth.

'It has been such a short journey,' said Gilbert, sighing.

Alice laughed happily. It was delicious to hear her laugh again; her spirits had come back to her: away from the old house, so full of sad associations, so troubled with fears, it was possible to remember that one was young, that there was still

sunshine in the world, and that one had a lover. Moreover, the cloud which had so long hung over her soul had lifted; her self-abasement and shame were gone, because she had found her mother, even though she found her dead.

She waited at the hotel while Gilbert went to make search for the first thing, the grave of Dora Hamblin. Presently he came back with a grave set face, very different from that with which he had looked in her eyes all the way from Waterloo Station.

'I have found it, Alison,' he said. 'Come, a surprise awaits you.'

She walked with him trembling. What was the surprise?

Of all sea-side cities, watering-places, retreats, hospitals, convalescent houses, or bathing-places, Bournemouth is the most remarkable. There was once a forest of pines. Somebody made a clearing and built a house just as if he was in Canada. Then another man made another clearing and built another house, and so on. The pines stand still between the houses, along the roads, in the gardens, on the hills, and round the town. The air is heavy with the breath of the pine. The sea is nothing; you are on the sea-shore, but there is no fierce sea-breeze, no curling line of waves, no dash of foam and spray. The waters creep lazily along the beach, and on the pier the fragrance of the pines crushes out the smell of the salt sea.

When the settlements were cleared, and the houses built, and rows of shops run up, there arose a great unknown genius who said: 'We have slopes, streams, and woods; we have a town planted in a forest by the sea-side; let us make a garden in our midst.' And they did so; a garden of Eden. Hither come, when the rest of the world is still battling with the east wind and frost, hollow-cheeked young men and drooping maidens to look for the tree of life in that garden, and to breathe those airs. They do not find that tree, but the air revives them for a while, and they linger on a little longer, and have time to lie in the sunshine and see the flowers come again before they die. This is the city of Youth and Death. Every house amid these pines is sacred to the memory of some long agony, some bitter wrench of parting, some ruthless trampling down of hope and joy. From every house has been poured the gloomy pageant of death, with mourners who followed the bier of the widow's only son, the father's cherished daughter.

Then that great genius who laid out the garden said: 'They come here to die: let us make death beautiful.' And they did so. They built a church upon a hill; they left the pines to stand as cypresses; they ran winding walks and planted flowering shrubs; they put up marble crosses on the graves of the youthful dead; they brought flowers of every season, and all sorts of trees which are sweet and graceful to look upon; they

refused to have any rude and vulgar monuments; they would have nothing but white marble crosses. Some stand in rows all together on an open slope, bounded and sheltered by the whispering pines with saffron-coloured cones; some stand each in its own little oblong, surrounded by plants and trees, shaded and guarded for ever. They bear the names of those who lie beneath; they are all of young men and girls: one is twenty-four, one is eighteen, one is twenty. Here and there you find an old man who has stumbled into the graveyard by accident. It jars upon the sense of right; it is a disgrace for him to have lived till seventy; he ought not to be here; he should have been carried five miles away, to the acre where the venerable pile of Christ Church guards the heaped-up dust of thirty generations, and the river runs swiftly below; but not here, not among the weeping girls and sad-faced boys. Let them all rise together, at the end, this army of young martyrs, with never an old man among them, to find with joyful eyes a fuller life than that from which they were so soon snatched away.

Thither Gilbert brought Alison. He said nothing, for, in truth, his own heart was filled with the sadness and beauty of the place. He led her up the slope to the most retired part of the churchyard, where the graves, those of twenty years back, were not so close together, and where each had its generous space with amplitude of breadth, such as is accorded to abbots and bishops in cathedrals. Quite at the farthest boundary, where the pines are the thickest, surrounded, too, by silver beeches, stripling oaks, and rhododendrons, stood the cross they came to see; and behind it were the flowers of summer, tended and cared for as if the poor young mother had never been forgotten by her child. There were only the initials 'D. H.,' with the date of her death and her age.

Alison sank at the foot of the grave, and Gilbert left her there.

It was a solemn moment, the most solemn in her life. To kneel beside that grave was in itself an act of thanksgiving and gratitude. For in it lay not only her mother, but the honour of her father. She thought of him more than of the mother whom she had never seen. Her tears fell for him, more than for the young life cut off so early. Was there ever a father so kind, so thoughtful, so untiring in generous and self-denying actions? Was there ever one so entirely to be loved by a daughter? And for four months she had been bearing about with her the bitter thought that perhaps this man—this good, religious, and Christian man—was what she never dared to put to herself in words.

'But that was all over now,' she said. 'No one henceforth would dare to whisper a word against his sacred memory.'

And then she sat and tried to realise that, like other girls, she

could now speak and think of her own mother lying dead at her feet.

Presently she returned to the hotel, and they passed a quiet, silent evening, walking on the sea-shore, or the pier, while the summer sun went down in splendour, and in the opal breadths of twilight sky they saw the silver curve of the new moon.

It was no time for love. Alison talked in whispers of her mother; what she was like; why her father had kept silence about her. Gilbert listened. The place was very quiet; in June most of the people have left Bournemouth; they were alone on the pier; there was a weight upon both their hearts, and yet the heart of one, at least, was full of gratitude and joy. But needs must that he who stays in the City of Death feels the solemn presence of Azrael.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW GILBERT READ THE MANUSCRIPT.

When Alison left him, Gilbert, after the fashion of his generation, began to soothe his soul with tobacco, on the road which runs along the cliff down to the beach. So far, all promised well: here was the grave of the mother, but where was the proof of her marriage? Perhaps, after all, his difficulties were only beginning.

Gilbert was in love. He would have been just as much in love had Alison been penniless; but it must be owned that to a briefless young barrister, fully alive to the advantages possessed by him who possesses a fortune, the fact of her splendid heritage heightened the charms of the young lady, and gave a lasting stability to his passion. And he could not avoid asking himself what would happen if this fortune were to be withdrawn? Married love on three hundred a year (which I fear represented the whole of Gilbert Yorke's fortune) would be delightful, with Alison for bride, could those superfluities of life which custom has rendered necessary for most of us be abolished. For dinner, a beefsteak and a glass of beer; for breakfast, tea, stale eggs, cheap butter; for lunch, a sandwich and a glass of beer: no society, no driving, no silks and pretty things for the wife; no wine, cigars, new books, pictures, little excursions in the country, stalls at the theatre, or clubs for the husband. To live like a wretched City clerk in a rickety box—one of a thousand rickety boxes—somewhere about Brixton or Stockwell. That might be the life.

Somehow, the spirit of the place depressed him. He tried to look on things from a more cheerful point of view: he bethought him that he was young and strong; he remembered that the whole world was open to him to go where he pleased, and to try his fortune in whatever way should seem possible. They would go together—he and Alison—hand in hand, and buy a farm in New Zealand—Canada—somewhere.

The sunny side of things would not last; depression and gloom returned; he went back to the hotel, and gloomily went to bed.

'I shall have a good night's rest,' he said, laying his head upon the pillow, 'and wake up in better spirits to-morrow.'

Nothing is easier than to promise one's self a good night's rest; nothing, however, is more uncertain. There is one man, and only one, who never fails to get it; he is the man who is going to be hanged early the next morning. Those unfortunates—the bulk of mankind—who cannot look forward to a quiet and comfortable execution at break of day, have nothing for it but to meet their pillows with a nightly sense of doubt.

Generally, Gilbert had no trouble in the matter of sleep; but to-night he felt strangely restless and wakeful. The excitement of the day, the long talk with Alison, the strange feeling that she was under the same roof with him, kept him awake. And then he thought of the place itself, so full of sorrowful memories, and the churchyard so crowded with those whom Death had called too soon, and ere their prime.

He went through the usual steps or phases of sleeplessness, trying first one side and then another: anon lying on his back; heaping up the pillows, and then tossing them aside. The night was profoundly silent; he could not even hear the murmur of the water as it washed the stones a hundred feet away; there was no wind in the air; there was no footfall in the street below; and he grew more wide awake every moment. At last he sprang up in a rage, and resolved to try the remedy recommended by Franklin the Eminent. Benjamin, as everybody knows, recommends the sufferers in such cases to get out of bed, fold back the clothes, smooth the pillow, walk about a little, and then try the pillow again. Gilbert did so: that is, he got out of bed, and began to walk up and down the narrow limits of the room. But it was perfectly dark; he did not know the position of the furniture; and when he had barked his elbows, broken his shins, scraped his nose, and blackened one eye by unexpected contact with different pieces of furniture, he finally drove sweet sleep far away by treading on the business end of a small tin-tack. The difficulty and pain of extracting the nail naturally made him more wakeful than ever. He sat upon the bed, and wondered what he should do next. The second remedy,

first recommended by some anonymous philosopher, is to drink a glass of water and lie down again. He found the carafe, drank half of it, and lay down again. The immediate result of this internal aspersion was to make him feel as if every limb were separately hung upon wires, and either would not, or could not, keep still. When your arms and legs begin to jerk about independently, and without your own control, it is high time to sit up and consider what to do next. Gilbert pacified his limbs by letting them walk about until they agreed to give up independent action.

The third remedy is perhaps the best and most certain : it is to read very carefully, and with great attention, the dullest book you can find. I keep some of the works of a very eminent modern writer by my own bedside always with that object, and it never fails. In this instance it was impossible, because there were no books in the room.

There remained the fourth and last remedy known to the aculty. It is to begin counting and go on until you fall asleep. It is currently believed that no one ever yet got as far as a thousand. Gilbert reached twelve hundred and thirty-two, then he stopped in disgust, for it seemed as if he were going to pass the rest of his life in counting.

So he sat up again and tried to persuade himself that he had got through a good part of the night.

And then, quite suddenly, there came over him a curious shivering accompanied by a nervous terror, the like of which he had never before experienced.

I have observed that if you put the question delicately, so as not in any way to hurt a man's self-respect, or arouse a suspicion of ridicule, you will in every case and from every man extort a consession that at some time or place he has been afraid of ghosts. Remark that I do not say 'feel supernatural terrors' or any circumlocution of that kind ; I say simply 'afraid of ghosts.'

Bournemouth is naturally chock full of ghosts. Gilbert had been wandering in the place of tombs ; his thoughts therefore turned to the subject. He was not a man who generally gave much heed to the unseen occupants of the air ; but to-night he *felt* them, they became importunate, they would not be denied. As he sat on the bed in the dark they fanned his cheek and played soft airs upon his hands.

He thought against his will of those who had come to the place, like Dora Hamblin, to die ; he thought of the multitudinous crosses in the cemetery, the graves of young lives cut off in their first promise and early flower ; he thought of the great cloud of sorrow which was for ever enveloping this city of slow Death, like the cloud which day and night hangs over Sheffield.

More salutary reflections would have followed, because he was quite in the mood to meditate, 'like anything,' or, like Young, Hervey, and Drelincourt, when he was suddenly arrested by the recollection that there were matches in his pocket, and that he had not yet looked at the manuscript given him by Alison.

Going gingerly, for fear of another tin-tack point upwards, he found the matches and lit his candle. Every ghost in the room instantly flew away in disgust. Which shows the value of a candle. He then looked for the manuscript in his portmanteau, put the candle on a chair by the bedside, arranged the sheets so that in case of his going to sleep suddenly—a thing which he fully expected to do while reading the paper—the candle would be unable to fall over and set fire to everything. It was Sydney Smith, I think, who anticipated me in calling attention to the malignant behaviour of bedside candles in this respect.

We know the contents of the manuscript. It was that which Rachel Nethersole had given to Anthony Hamblin.

Gilbert did not go to sleep suddenly and unexpectedly. On the contrary, he sat up and read the papers through with no abatement of interest to the very end, but, on the other hand, with an excitement which increased until he had fairly finished the last word. Then he laid the papers down on the bed, and, between his lips, cursed the name and the memory of a man.

Of all men in the world, that Anthony Hamblin should have been so inconceivable a villain! That he, whom all alike loved to honour and reverence, the very model of a blameless man, should have left in this cruel and heartless manner the poor young wife: that he should have descended to the meanness—he, with his practically boundless wealth—of actually cutting down her miserable weekly allowance—why, it was astounding; it was beyond all belief and all precedent.

When one tried to look the matter fairly in the face, the difficulty was only increased. If a man leads two lives, one for his household and the world, and the other for himself alone, there is always some vague rumour concerning him which gets about, and spreads, as noiselessly as an ivy, around his name. The wife and daughters do not know; the sons learn something of it, and after passionately denying the thing, sorrowfully accept it; the outside fringe of cousinhood learn something of it; it is impossible for a man to conceal altogether his secret vices, because there must be some accomplices whose interest in keeping them secret is not so strong as his own, and whose shame at their discovery would be, perhaps, just nothing at all, a thing not worth considering. Gilbert was a man who knew the world; that is, he knew about as much of the seamy side as a young man of five-and-twenty or so, not of vicious habits,

naturally acquires by conversation and intercourse with his fellows. This kind of knowledge, in fact, is a part of the armour in which we have to fight the battle of life. With many men it does duty for the whole armour of light.

Had Anthony Hamblin been a man secretly addicted to evil courses, some one would have known it: there would have been a breath upon that shining mirror; but there was none. And yet the man who at fifty was so admirable in all the relations of life must have been, by plain showing of his own deserted wife, base and mean, at thirty, beyond all belief! The wonder grew more and more. Could one with any sense of continuity pass back from Anthony Hamblin at fifty, living wholly for the happiness of his daughter, to Anthony Hamblin at thirty, leaving his wife to pine away forgotten and despised, coming to her bedside only at the last moment, when she called him, in despair, when she was dying of neglect and cruelty? In the case of ordinary sinners one can trace the same man through all his downward course: if he repents and leads a new life, he is still visibly and demonstrably the same man; but it was impossible to recognise in the later Anthony Hamblin any resemblance to the demon of selfishness who, twenty years before, had borne the same name. Gilbert remembered one or two old stories. There was a certain King of Sicily whose body was once occupied by an angel for three whole years, during which all brigands became penitent, the burglar lay down with the policeman, and the jail-bird with the judge. The real king, meantime, went in rags, and got kicked because he was poor. There was another story, too, of a nun who wanted to see the world, and went out of her convent and carried on anyhow for nineteen years, until she repented (being no longer beautiful), and returned (being desperately hard up) to the convent. She naturally thought that in spite of repentance she would catch it, but what was her surprise to find that her absence during all these years had been unknown to the sisters, because an angel had been doing her work and personating her? So she repented in very truth, and was pardoned, and died in sanctity.

But this was just a contrary case. The devil had certainly occupied the body of Anthony Hamblin for a time. How did he get in? By what contract, temptation, or promise, was he admitted? How long did he stay? What other devilry did he work? Was there any record of his pranks and villainies? How was he finally got rid of? Alas! Anthony Hamblin himself, who alone could reveal this secret, was dead, and the story of the new demoniac could never, therefore, be given to the world in its entirety. For this paper, no doubt, contained but a single episode.

'It is wonderful,' said Gilbert, looking round. 'Good heavens!

If one had been asked for the name of the most upright, the most kind-hearted, the most unselfish man in London, every one who knew Anthony Hamblin would have named *him;* and see what he was!

'Most to be pitied is Alison. She must never know how her idol has been shattered. Rachel Nethersole must not tell her. In comparison with this father of hers, even Black Stephen shows in rosy colours. Poor Alison! poor child!'

These were, so to speak, the last words of Anthony himself.

Just then, the candle, which had been flickering in the socket, suddenly went out. Gilbert rose and pulled up the blind. The day was already breaking, and there was promise of a bright and splendid morning; he opened the window and breathed the cool air, and then—then—I think—nay, I am sure that he went to sleep, and had a dream, in spite of what he says himself. Because, as for what followed, his own account is silly, as you shall judge for yourselves.

First of all, it was not dark; a cloudless night in June is never dark: then it was not a ghost-like room, but a singularly prosaic and matter-of-fact kind of room, a modern, square, newly built hotel bedroom, and yet to the heated imagination of the young man, it suddenly became full of ghosts.

Some years ago, there was a controversy about ghosts. A sapient philosopher thought he demolished all but naked ghosts—a very, very small minority, I am happy to say—by the simple axiom that you cannot expect the ghost of a coat, a gown, a pair of gloves, in fact, not the ghost of any article of clothing at the time at all. This maxim was thought so profound that men quarrelled as to who was its founder. For my own part, I denied the proposition. I asked for proof, and I put a question which has never yet been answered, and I think it never will. I said, 'Why not?'

This bedroom of Gilbert's, as if to demolish the sagacious demolisher of ghosts, became suddenly crammed with ghosts of clothes, furniture, vessels and instruments, men and women. There was a soft light in the room by which you could see clearly through everything belonging to the room, and the hotel had disappeared.

Before the eyes of the watcher appeared a sofa, on which lay the figure of a girl, young and beautiful, but hollow-eyed, wasted and wan of cheek, with eyes too bright and full, and fingers too fragile. As Gilbert gazed she turned her face towards him. Her eyes were red, because she had been weeping. They were something like the eyes of Alison, but not so dark, and Gilbert knew the spectre for that of Dora Hamblin.

She was quite alone, deserted, and dying. If one is to die suddenly and swiftly; if with a single touch Azrael calls us

away, it is better to be alone; when one has to die day by day, slowly, to *envisager* Death while as yet he is afar off, to expect him from morning to morning, to dread him in the night watches, to call faith and fortitude to your help many weeks before the time, it is well to have some one beside you, if it is only to smooth the wasted cheek, and to press with a little sympathy the worn hand.

Quite alone, deserted by her husband, left to the tender mercies of lodging-house harpies and strangers, reduced to a pittance, dying. Her husband meanwhile earning by his upright walk among his fellow-citizens the character of a blameless, just, and honourable merchant.

'Scoundrel!' thought Gilbert, 'if you were not lying dead at the bottom of the Serpentine, and if Alison were not your daughter, it would be my sacred duty to horse-whip you from Aldgate Pump to Temple Bar.'

And then he saw her eyes light up, and a look of joy return to her face because Anthony Hamblin was beside her. And the tears were in his eyes, too.

'Ah, crocodile!' murmured Gilbert.

Everything vanished, and Gilbert, rubbing his eyes, found that it was broad daylight, and past six in the morning. Imagination had played strange tricks with him. Yet for the rest of his life he will seem to know poor Dora Hamblin, what she was like, and will remember her, wasted and dying, alone and in tears upon the spectral couch.

'Poor Alison!' he thought again. 'What a father to have had!'

Then he began to think uncomfortably about hereditary proclivities.

'It *must* have been the Devil,' he said, 'who had temporary hold of him. And if not, why, she has inherited all his good qualities and none of his bad ones. Children copy what they see. Alison—bless her!—only saw the virtues which her father easily assumed. She copied them, and is—what he pretended to be. After all, mock-turtle has its uses. It imposes on some, and makes us admire the real thing profoundly.'

'What a skeleton for a gentleman's private cupboard!' he murmured. 'When we all thought the righteous man was gone into his study, or closet, as the preachers say, to meditate over his righteousness, by the aid of a choice Havana, and some excellent old brandy, he must have been occupying himself in grimly contemplating this picture of the past, his own cruelty, his desertion, his incredible meanness. I wonder if he repented and went about secretly in sack-cloth with a hair-shirt; nothing but a hair-shirt with innumerable ends sticking into him would have met his case. And how is one ever to believe in a man

again? Have the archbishops skeletons in their cupboards? Is there no virtue anywhere? Is everyone, including myself, capable of deliberate cruelty, treachery, and villainy, only to gratify a whim? In that case, we had better dismiss the clergy, save all the money we spend on them, pull down the churches, double the police, and give up expecting any good in any man. Human life is truly a wonderful thing. *Rien n'est sur que l'imprévu:* every man is what he does not seem; all the creatures which pretend to be sheep are goats; we eat leg of goat and call it leg of mutton; roast quarter of lamb is quarter of wolf; if Anthony Hamblin was an unsuspected devil, then Black Hamblin is no doubt an unregarded angel. I wonder, by the way, if his Blackness knew about the little establishment at Lulworth? I should think not. He could not have known; and yet, he knew Dora. Well—the thing is getting mixed.'

He dressed himself and went to the beach, where he bathed in the sea, and shook off his nervous terrors. But he had passed through one of those nights of which the memory remains green in a man's mind all his life.

After breakfast he walked with Alison, who, if she had seen any ghosts, did not speak of them, to the churchyard. She walked, this wood-nymph of Clapham Common, with an elasticity and strength surprising to the residents of Bournemouth.

On the way they passed a chair, in which sat a young girl pale and weak. By the delicate bloom upon her hectic cheek, by the brightness of her eyes, by the weakness with which she sat, it was evident that the end was not far off. Beside her walked her brother, a lad of twenty, with narrow chest, stooping shoulders, and frequent cough. For him, too, would come a speedy end.

The poor girl looked at Alison as she passed. She sighed and whispered to her brother:

'See, she is young and beautiful; and she is well; and she is with her lover. Oh, Charlie! what *have* we done—you and I?'

What had they done, indeed?

Gilbert left Alison at the lych-gate, and went in search of the registrar's office.

That was easy to find. He gave the date and was shown the entry. 'Dora Hamblin, of consumption!' Dora Hamblin—and here his eye fell upon a word which so startled him that he was fain to grasp the table for support, to rub his eyes, to read again and again, and to ask himself what was the meaning of this new surprise.

The revelation of the night which would blacken for ever the memory of a man whom he had worshipped from boyhood, staggered him, but not so much as this new discovery. Could it be a false entry? Had Anthony, being still in the power of

the devil, actually added to his former wickedness by deliberately making a lying statement?

He copied it into his pocket-book with as much care as if he wished to preserve a facsimile of the writing, which would not have helped him, because it was the writing of the clerk. And then, turning over the pages again, and referring back to the entry, he closed the book and went away.

He avoided the hotel, because he wanted to avoid Alison, until he could think quietly over this new discovery. He went away by himself, and sat under the cliff, trying to think what was best to be done.

At last he resolved upon a course of action. He would say nothing at present about this extraordinary entry, which promised to upset and ruin everything. He would keep it a profound secret.

He returned to the hotel, and read the manuscript again—twice.

'It is wonderful,' he murmured. 'If it is true it is wonderful. But I cannot understand. It *cannot* be true. And yet—and yet——'

He laid down the paper, and sought Alison, who was sitting beside her mother's grave, thoughtful and quiet, but not unhappy.

'My dear,' he said, 'I want you, in the presence of your mother, to renew your engagement to me.'

She rose, and gave him her hand without a word. Above the grave they kissed each other solemnly.

'Alison,' he went on, 'I claim this of you because there is now no doubt that your mother was a wedded wife—poor thing!'

'Why do you say "poor thing," Gilbert?' she asked. 'Because my mother died young?'

'Partly,' he replied. 'But partly because her marriage was not happy. She ran away with your father; she went with him to a place called Lulworth, not far from here; they did not agree; they separated.'

'Oh! how could anyone quarrel with my dear father?'

'He went back to town; she remained at Lulworth, where you were born. She grew weaker; they thought of bringing her here for a change; and here she died. That is most of her story.'

'My poor mother! But, Gilbert, was my father with her?'

'She died, as she wished to die, in the arms of Anthony Hamblin,' Gilbert replied.

In the afternoon Alison and Mrs. Duncombe went back to town, while Gilbert pursued his way to Lulworth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW GILBERT WENT TO LULWORTH.

BOURNEMOUTH is within fifteen miles of Lulworth. That is the first reason why it takes longer to get from one of these important centres to the other, than to either from London. You may, I believe, if you get up very early in the morning, manage to travel from Bournemouth to Poole Junction, and from Poole Junction to Wareham, all in one day. But after that you have got to find your way from Wareham to Lulworth, which is quite another thing, and a long journey of eight miles by itself, and may require a second day. It is like a pilgrimage from Bayswater to Highgate. A cab will take you there in half an hour. The rapid locomotive will whirl you there, breathless, as they used to say forty years ago, in four hours and a half, allowing for changes, and for waiting at Willesden Junction, where the directors feel it their duty to detain all passengers for at least three quarters of an hour.

Gilbert got over the difficulty of the trains by travelling after the manner of our grandfathers. He posted, at the expense of Anthony Hamblin and Company.

He had to do two things. First, to examine the register of births for that of Alison. Next, to find out, if that were possible, the people with whom the unhappy mother was left, and to learn from them what could be learned.

The chance that a lodger should be remembered at a sea-side place after twenty years, seemed slender. But there was one fact of which Gilbert did not think.

It was this, which helped him very naturally.

Twenty years ago, Lulworth was as yet unknown. I mean that no lodgers went there at all: tourists and people who always leave their homes for change of air, and betake themselves somewhere for a month of physical discomfort, bad dinners, hard beds, narrow rooms, inefficient attendance, robbery, sea air, dulness, absence of books, friends, society, and amusements, had never heard of Lulworth.

Even the commercial travellers, who, poor souls, are never permitted to contemplate the beauties of Nature, save in the vicinity of shops, did not, and do not now, include Lulworth in their circuit. There are no shops there at all, and the modest wants of the little place are supplied by means of some middleman of Corfe, Swanage, Wareham or even the aristocratic Weymouth.

Lulworth, cove and town, which is hardly yet actually discovered, being much less known to the average Briton than Ujiji in Central Africa, and less visited by the average traveller than the Falls of the Zambesi, was in those days of Dora's marriage, an absolutely unknown place. If a man were to go round searching for a spot in which to bury his head, either during the brief space of a honeymoon, or for a prolonged period of financial embarrassment, creditors being incapable of even suspecting such a retreat, or even for a lifetime—*oubliant, oublié*—there was, in those days, no village in all the realm of England so fit for the purpose. Nobody, in the time when Dora Hamblin, a blushing and happy bride, was taken there by her husband, had ever heard of it. Nor can I at all understand how her husband found it out. The place was originally discovered, however, some years before Dora's honeymoon, by a stray traveller of inquiring and curious mind, who wandered eastwards along the shore from Weymouth, when George the Third was not only king, but was actually staying in that tranquil watering-place. This pedestrian, born before his time, mentioned it to one or two friends, and got the place put upon the county map. The Ordnance Survey officers afterwards found it there. And once the Bishop of Winchester heard of it, and went there, and found a church or two, and a congregation or two, who had never before beheld a bishop, and thought all bishops went about in mitre and crosier, and were disappointed to find a mild old man in apron and lawn sleeves, who said, 'Dear, dear!' when he heard that no one had ever been confirmed, and at once confirmed the whole village, Dissenters and all, without more ado.

People who cannot afford posting, get there chiefly by way of Swanage. There is a steamer which runs backwards and forwards between Lulworth Cove and Swanage Bay. The voyage is one of those traps for tourists, set by frolicsome persons at every seaside place. Outside Swanage Bay there is always what the jocose captain of the *Heather Bell* calls a 'bit of a bobble.' The vessel, which is rather smaller than a penny river steamboat, rolls, in fact, joyously. The course through the furrows, over the rolling way which can by no means be called silent, carries you under the face of perpendicular cliffs, which rise like a great wall over the sea, with never a break. You round a cape, at whose feet the waves are tearing and roaring, and still the wall stretches ahead as far as eye can reach. The people, mostly lying helpless on the deck, look up with green and glassy eyes, and contemplate the endless precipice with a deadly sinking at the heart. Is there any Lulworth at all? Has the whole of the past life been a dream? Is there to be no future, but this eternal roll in a little boat upon a chopping

sea? Suddenly, while they are wondering if anything in the next world could be worse than this, her head is turned. Courage. There is the narrowest cleft in the rocks, a mere doorway just broad enough for the *Heather Bell* to steam through. Get up, good people: shake yourselves: call for things to eat: we are in smooth water: we are in the little circular bay cut out of the rocks, which they call Lulworth Cove: you may land if you like and see Lulworth village.

There is a little beach of sand, with a boat or two: there are a few houses: there is an inn and a church, and a school. Beyond the houses, when you have climbed the hill, you may turn to the left and go down again. You will find two more little coves side by side, into one of which the waves force their angry way through a dark and jagged cavern. From the roof hang great clusters of rough, luxuriant sea-weed; its sides are dark with recesses, in which the waters rage madly, and roar with a kind of unmeaning rage. Here the *prieure* lurks with long and hungry arms, wondering if the next man she catches will know the secret of blinding her eyes with the hood provided for the purpose by beneficent Nature. The second cove has a doorway, so to speak, of its own, cut right through the cliff from top to bottom, a narrow passage across which two men might shake hands, and where every entering wave does battle with that which entered before it, at the very portals of the cove. Within, it is an ever-agitated churn.

That is the whole of Lulworth; but you may spend a long summer holiday in the place, and never tire of it, if you get fine weather; and if you should tire, there is Dungy Head beyond, with Durdle Bay and the Barn Door.

Gilbert proceeded at once to business.

First the register of births.

This was not difficult to find.

The entry in the Bournemouth register of Dora Hamblin's death contained one word, as we have seen, which startled the reader. The word haunted him; it followed him like that persistent fly which teased the unhappy despot to madness: it buzzed in his ears: it refused to leave him. A word which was so surprising that it seemed to upset everything in the whole wide word: a word which made a new departure absolutely necessary: a word which made everything unintelligible.

What was more surprising still, the same word was repeated in the entry of Alison's birth in the parish register. There was either fraud or else . . . what else? What was the meaning of it?

He searched the church register of christenings. The same word was repeated.

He made copies of the two entries in his pocket-book.

Then he climbed down the rocks to the wild little coves mentioned above, and sat there a couple of hours, trying to put things together.

Then it occurred to him to read again the 'Journal of a Deserted Wife.'

Presently he thought he saw daylight. A theory, which seemed the only theory possible, suggested itself to him.

'Poor Alison!' he said, 'who shall tell her the truth?'

He sat there a-thinking while the time went on, and presently he felt hungry, and went back to the hotel for dinner. For the good of the house, and in order to conciliate the landlord, whom he intended presently to cross-examine, he ordered a pint of port after dinner. Being one of the degenerate strain of British youth, who cannot drink the ardent port of country inns, he poured the contents of the bottle into a pot of mignonette in the window, and after a decent interval, during which the flowers waggled their heads sadly and then drooped and died, he sallied forth, and assailed the landlord with a proposal of pipes and brandy-and-water.

He was a biddable sort of man, the landlord: advanced in life: gifted with a profound thirst: and ruled by a wife, much younger than himself, who seldom allowed that thirst to be quenched as he desired. His heart warmed to the young fellow, who, after drinking quantities of beer with his dinner, and a pint of port after it—no one knew better than himself the amount of brandy in that port—coolly proposed brandy-and-water as if he had had nothing. Generally after serving a guest with a little pint of that generous beverage, he had been enabled to observe symptoms of intoxication, such as cheek flushing, speech thickening, legs tying themselves into knots, shoulders lurching, temper quickening, and so forth. This gallant young gentleman carried his handsome head and curly locks as if he had not taken a single glass: he did not grumble: he did not lurch: he did not, like the last guest who drank of that brew, tell the landlord that his port had poisoned him—not at all: he said, 'Let us have a pipe and some brandy-and-water.' O most remarkable young man! If he could hold out as well over spirits and water as over spirits and elderberry wine, the landlord thought he saw his way to a pleasant evening such as rarely came in his way.

It is, of course, understood that the good wife saw no objection to her husband making himself as drunk as a hog, provided he did it at some one else's expense.

The evening was chilly, and the bar-parlour looked comfortable. Gilbert proposed that they should take their pipes beside the fire. The landlady offered no objection, and hovered about, anxious to take her part in the conversation.

'I suppose,' said Gilbert, when the preliminaries were arranged, the tumblers filled, and the pipes lit, feeling the way cautiously —'I suppose you do not remember much about your visitors when they are gone?'

'Well,' replied the landlord, now completely comfortable, before a full glass of the mixture which was generally denied him—'well, we do and we do not. Them as come and go, for instance, the bed-and-breakfast-and-bring-your-bill lot, and the pint-of-beer-with-a-knapsack-gentleman-tramp, we mostly forget as soon as they go. But we remember some—ay! we remember some. I could tell you a story or two now of our visitors, I des-say, if I was to think a bit.'

'Tell the gentleman about Captain Roscommon,' said his wife.

'Captain Roscommon? Ay! that was a start. One never heard of a more singular start, so to speak, than that of Captain Roscommon.'

Gilbert saw that the only way was to work his way to Dora Hamblin through Captain Roscommon, and forbore from interruption, save of the sympathetic and interjectional kind.

Then the old man went on:

'Captain Roscommon, the coastguard officer down our way. A youngish man he was, about five-and-forty years of age, and first-lieutenant in the Royal Navy too. And as active he was, as if the whole of the revenue depended on him. Well, there always was a good deal of smuggling in these parts, though nothing to what it was in the days of the long war, when old Dan Gulliver worked the whole of the French coast from Lyme; the farmers were in it: the clergy were in it: the magistrates were in it: the innkeepers were in it. Lord! sometimes I think I might have been in it myself. The captain's predecessor, he was a good, easy sort of man, oldish, and tired of fighting. He was in it, too. Many is the gallons of right good stuff the old man found in his cellar, and never asked—as why should he?—why or where? But he kept quiet till he died, and Captain Roscommon came after him.

'My word! There was mighty little smuggling after he came. Early and late, day and night, the boat was off the cliffs, and the men were on the look-out. Two years it lasted. The farmers and poor landlords, like myself, were most ruined for want of stuff; all the old stuff was gone, and no new stuff coming in: the customers were grumbling: and the whole country-side was in an unchristian rage. Well, sir, you'd hardly believe it, but one night, Captain Roscommon, going home over there by Dungy Head, the evening being fine and a bright moon, though late in the year and chilly, he met eight men with blackened faces. They didn't speak; but though he fought like ten tomcats, they just chucked him over the cliff.

'In the morning he was found there, but all of a mash, and never spoke again. After he was gone things improved, and we got more neighbourly and religious-like to each other. For the next officer was a different kind of man, and the stuff came over again as of old. And the chuckers-over, they were never found out.'

'That is a very remarkable story,' said Gilbert. 'Take some more brandy-and-water after it. And how, if one may criticise so good a story, did anyone ever know, since the poor man was senseless when he was found, that there were eight men, and that their faces were blackened?'

The landlord shook his head solemnly, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

'It is one of the things,' he replied, 'that no one ever understood. We all knew there were eight men; likewise that their faces were blackened. But nobody knew how we knew. The poor captain was very much regretted, except for his activity.'

'So I should say,' replied Gilbert. 'Now carry your memory twenty-one years back or so, and tell me if you recollect anything happening then.'

'There was the tiger,' said the landlord's wife, interposing. 'That was twenty years ago. Tell him about the tiger.'

'Ay, ay—about the tiger. That was twenty years ago, sure.'

The old man paused, refilled his pipe, and lit it, stretched out his legs, drank half a glass of brandy-and-water, and began the tiger story.

I am sorry that there is insufficient space here to admit of that story being related at length. It was a very good story, from a rustic point of view. It told how a tiger belonging to a travelling menagerie got out of his cage and took shelter in an empty stable, and how—this was the wonderful thing, and the real point of the story—it was most fortunate that one John, known everywhere as a devil of a fellow, one who stood at nothing, was out of the way, providentially gone to the nearest market-town on an errand, or else he would have gone for that tiger. Gilbert listened with a dazed feeling; there was no end to the story. He could not make out how the tiger was caught, if ever he was caught, or how many rustics he killed, supposing that he did slaughter rustics; he had a nightmare upon him while he listened, as if Providence forcibly, and even visibly, was hauling back John by the back hair, so that he should not know, until too late, where that tiger was.

'Have some more brandy-and-water,' he murmured feebly.

Then he remembered that this story belonged to the year about which he wished to learn further particulars, and he pulled himself together.

'Come,' he said, 'I call that a good memory which remembers

so far back. I wonder if you can remember anything more about that year?'

The landlord hesitated. Then he appealed to his wife.

'Twenty years ago, wife,' he said; 'what happened twenty years ago? Besides the tiger, I mean. Ah, lucky thing it was that that John——'

'There was the tiger, and you've told that; then there was the wet summer, you can't have forgotten that!'

'Ah, the wet summer!' The old fellow sat up and seemed as if he was going to begin another awful story, worse than about the tiger. 'Surely you're too young to remember about that wet summer!'

'Yes,' said Gilbert. 'I fear I am. Never mind the wet summer. Did nobody come to the inn that summer?'

'I can't say,' replied the old man. 'We weren't then, as one may say, what we are now. People didn't come over from Swanage in the *Heather Bell* nor from Weymouth in the 'bus. And artists didn't come and paint the cove, nor the caves, nor the rocks, as they do now. Yet the cove and the caves were there all the time.'

'It was the summer when I was married,' the woman struck in. She had been going backwards and forwards perpetually with a duster and a glass, and she was now brandishing the same glass apparently and the same duster which she had been using for the last two hours. But these glasses and dusters are very much turned out on the same lines. And Gilbert's brains were a little addled after the two stories of Captain Roscommon and the tiger. 'It was the year I was married.' She spoke as if it was not her own husband but somebody else's, who was sitting in the arm-chair before her. 'My husband, he was an old man compared to me.'

'Nay, nay,' said her husband. 'Two score and five is not old. I were two score and five when I married thee.'

'And I was twenty. Well, wilful gell will have her own way. While we were courting, if you call that courting when him as is old enough to be your father wants to be your husband, there came to this inn a newly-married couple.'

'Ay,' said Gilbert. 'Pray take some more brandy-and-water.' It seemed to him as if the only way to the memories of these people was through diluted spirits.

The woman drank off the contents of her husband's glass. She was one of that very common class of women who, when they get to forty or thereabouts, show a rosy face full of good-nature and kindliness, mixed with an expression which betrays the love of creature-comforts.

'There isn't much to tell,' she said. 'They came to this inn. They stayed a week. I was not in the inn at the time, nor for

a year afterwards. Then they asked for lodgings, and they came to us. We had the only lodgings in the town.'

'Pray go on,' said Gilbert. 'I think these may be people I am interested in. Tell me more about them. What was their name?'

'They were Mr. and Mrs. Hamblin,' said the woman. 'And now, sir, if you please, before we go any further—for I see, by the flushing of your handsome cheek, that it *is* the party you want to hear about, and no other—we will understand each other.'

The women in this part of the country, thought Gilbert, are cleverer than the men. This woman's husband would have told everything just as it occurred to his memory, without a thought of the consequences. His wife, however, had the sense to see that so many questions were not prompted by idle curiosity alone, but that this young fellow, with the frank eyes and honest face, had a reason for his curiosity.

'Hamblin is the name,' said Gilbert. 'I am anxious to find out all about that young couple. You may have heard that there is a reward offered for'—he stopped and checked himself—'for certain information connected with them.'

'In that case, sir,' said the woman, 'I shall say no more, until you tell me what sort of information is wanted; and if my husband says anything, he is a greater dolt than I ever took him for; and as for the matter of that, it is his bed-time. And to be sure he's had more than enough drink by this time.'

This resolute female seized her husband by the arm and dragged him, unresisting, out of the room. Ten minutes or so later, the interval being just enough to admit of his being crammed into bed and the clothes dragged over him, she came down again and seated herself before Gilbert.

'Now, sir,' she said, 'you and me can do business together. When a young gentleman like yourself comes over to Lulworth in a post-chay, when he goes to the church to consult registers, when he calls for a pint of good port and wastes it all in the mignonette-pot, which he might have thought of other people's flowers——'

'Ah, you saw that, did you?' said Gilbert, a little ashamed.

'When he tries to get round the landlord with pipes and brandy,—why, then, I think it is time for a body with a head upon her shoulders to look about her. Now then, sir, what do you want?'

'I want, first, the certificate of marriage of Dora Hamblin with her husband.'

'Very good.' She sat down and clasped her hands over her knees. 'And how much may that be worth? Mind you, it isn't in this parish church nor in the next.'

'Yesterday morning I would have offered you five hundred pounds for it. This morning I made a discovery, confirmed by the register of this parish, which materially alters the value of the information. Still it is valuable, and I will give you, or send to you, fifty pounds for the proof of marriage.'

'Fifty pounds?' cried the woman. 'Why, I can give you the proof now at once, on the instant minute. Fifty pounds!' Then her face became suddenly suspicious. 'But how do I know that you would give it when you'd got the information? And how do I know what use you want to make of it? And how shall I get the money, so that *he*'—she pointed with her finger to the upper part of the house, to make it clear that it was her husband she meant—'how shall I get it so that *he* shan't know nothing about it?'

'I will make all clear for you,' said Gilbert. 'You shall have the money paid you in gold and secretly, to do what you like with. And as for the use I am going to make of the information, that shall be proved to you to be the very best possible. Come now.'

'Wait till to-morrow,' said the woman. 'I must think it over.'

In the morning, after breakfast, when the landlord had strolled away to have a crack with the boatman on the beach, when the village was quite still, or only pleasantly full of such musical noises as belong to a village—the droning of a mill-wheel, the crowing of cocks, the gurgle of the rising tide in the cove, the roll of the ever-vexed waves in the perforated rocks, the bray of a donkey, or the grinding of a cart over the road—the landlady, in the quiet seclusion of the garden, told Gilbert all she had to tell.

'She was a sweet young thing, and he was a brute'—that was the way in which she began her narrative—'a brute he was, though at first butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. They came here from Newbury, where she had been living with her sister; father and mother dead. They had rooms at the inn here for a week, and then came to us. After two months he went away, and left her alone, with no one in the wide world but me to talk to. She told me all about herself.

'Well, she loved him, that was quite certain; though what she found to love in a man so cross and suspicious I never could find out—a nasty brute!

'He went away, as I said; but he came back a few days later, and stayed a good long time, the best part of two months more, being the whole of that time in a temper. A grumpy brute! Nothing was good enough for him. If it was the beer and the wine we got him from the inn here, he called it swill only fit for pigs; and if it was the baker's bread and fresh

butter for his breakfast, he snarled and growled at his wife: it was all her fault that he wasn't in London living off the best. And she, poor thing, had to bear it all, and did like a lamb.

'She hadn't the spirit to reply. When he growled she said nothing. When he walked about the room and cursed and swore, she only cried. When he went out for a walk, I used to find her, pretty lamb, sitting on the sofy, crying all to herself.'

Gilbert thought of his ghosts, at Bournemouth.

'I knew this couldn't last, and it did not. One day he went away, and I heard him tell her that he should be gone three months at least, and that it was very important and particular business. He went away—oh! be joyful, and we had peace. The young lady took to me, and we had walks together, and I sat with her in the evening. And one day she told me something.

'Well, her husband never came back at all. Mind you, never at all. And when he wrote he scolded. He began by allowing her three pounds a week, which was little enough for a lady like poor Mrs. Hamblin: then he made it two pounds: and lastly he made it one pound, which was no more than she wanted for her simple food and lodging. And she fretting and crying all the time for a sight of his face—his ugly, scowling face.'

The woman was silent awhile. It was not only the prospect of the reward which inspired her to tell everything; but the indignation of her heart.

'If ever a woman was murdered, she was murdered. If ever a man deserved hanging for wilful murder, it was the man Hamblin.'

Gilbert started; he had almost forgotten of whom they were speaking.

'You may take a cudgel, and beat out a body's brains at one blow, and you are less wicked than the man who stabs you a thousand times, and stabs you every day until your life is slowly driven out of you. And this I saw done, and could do nothing to prevent it.

'One thing I did. I persuaded her, as her husband had deserted her, to say nothing about the baby. I wanted her to keep the baby as a surprise. If that wouldn't soften his heart, nothing would.'

'The baby?' Gilbert had forgotten Alison for the moment.

'Of course. There was a baby. I suppose,' the woman added with asperity, 'that there is nothing uncommon about a baby, though I've got no children myself. Yes; the baby came, and a lovely and beautiful child she was, though dark of skin. She never told her husband the baby was coming. And she did not tell him the baby was come. And he never asked why she

didn't write for three weeks. I think that when she had the baby, she left off pining for him, and gave up all her love for the child.

'A pretty picture she made with her little baby. I think I see her now. We christened the child at the church here, and I was her godmother, because she said, poor lady, that I was her only friend. We called her by a strange, outlandish name, too. It was her mother's—Alison. What's the matter, sir?'

'Nothing,' said Gilbert, turning his head. 'Go on.'

'After the baby was born, her strength began to go away from her, slowly at first, and then quickly. I ought to have written to tell her husband, but I hated him too much; and besides, I thought she might get better.

'She never did. Oh, me! she got worse and worse. The doctor said that perhaps a change of air would set her up a little. Then at last, but it was too late, Mr. Anthony Hamblin came and took her away. It was arranged that they were to go to Bournemouth, and when she was settled, to have her baby with her. But the baby was never sent to her, because as soon as she got to Bournemouth she lost her head, and then got worse, and lay down and died.'

There was silence for a space, while the woman wiped her streaming eyes.

'And the baby?' asked Gilbert.

'Mr. Anthony came after the death, and took the baby away. He said she was going to be brought up at Brighton—pretty dear!'

'Would you like to see her again?'

'Would I? Tell me, sir, do you know where she is?'

'What would you say,' asked Gilbert, 'if I were to bring her here myself, and show her the place where her mother lived and found kind friends?'

'She really is alive and well then, the pretty baby?'

'Really alive and well; and the loveliest young lady in all the world, and the best.'

The woman looked at him sharply, and then laughed.

'It's easy to see that you think so, sir,' she said; 'and I wish you joy with all my heart: and I'm sure she'll have a good partner.'

'And now describe to me what her father was like, if you remember him.'

She described as best she could. Gilbert had ceased to wonder now. But his heart sank as he thought how the story would have to be told.

'I want but one thing more,' he said, presently. 'I know all except where they were married.'

Why, I can tell you that as well,' said the woman. 'She told

me herself. It was at Hungerford. They were married by special license, two days before they ran away. He drove her over in a dog-cart, married her in the church, and had her back again to Newbury, while her sister thought she had gone to spend the morning with her cousin. That was where they were married.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

HOW MISS NETHERSOLE SOFTENED HER HEART.

GILBERT confided his surprising discoveries to his pocket-book, but made no other confidant. He left Lulworth in the morning with renewed promises that Alison should speedily visit the place of her birth, and made his way across country as speedily as possible to the little town of Hungerford. Here it was not difficult to find the marriage certificate. The entry, which surprised him no longer, corresponded with those of Bournemouth and Lulworth, and finally completed his chain of evidence. Everything, in fact, was made out at last, and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Dora's marriage ; the birth and baptism of the child: Dora's death and burial at Bournemouth ; the removal of the infant by Anthony Hamblin—not a single point was missing.

Then, how to make the best use of his knowledge ?

First of all, he would go on to Newbury and see Miss Nethersole herself. Then, the forged receipts—it would be well if he could get those into his own hands. He had now the great advantage of a complete knowledge of the case. He knew what to tell, and what to conceal. He was master of a secret almost as important as that possessed by young Nick himself ; and, like him, he was naturally anxious that it should not be fooled away.

The town of Newbury, which has nothing but its two battles, now rather dim and faded in men's memories, to connect it with the history of this realm of England, is only some nine miles from Hungerford. In that part of the country the towns are all placed about nine miles from each other—which means that four miles and a half is as far as the old-fashioned farmer cared to drive his pack-horses to market. As soon as that distance, as a maximum, was accomplished, he sat down, unloaded his animals, spread out his wares for sale, waited for customers, and so founded a market town. That is the real origin, only history-books will not own it, of all our market towns. Beneficent Nature, when the town was founded and a church built,

proceeded to start a river, which should run through the town, and carry barges up and down. Thus the place was completely fitted. At Newbury there is not only a stream, but it contains fish: and there is an inn of the old-fashioned kind where the landlord will take you to the likeliest places, show you trophies of the rod, tell you stories such as Izaak Walton would have loved to hear, and provide you with a bottle of port to help your listening. Gilbert fortunately lighted on this inn. Olivet Lodge, he discovered, stands on the high road to Hungerford, about a quarter of a mile from the town. It is a small square house of red brick, standing in its own gardens. These are extensive for so small a house, but formal and stiff of aspect, so that the visitor would probably feel a sense of disappointment if anything about the place were out of order, if there were visible a single blade of grass on the gravel walk, a single stray weed in the flower beds, or a presumptuous daisy, to say nothing of a dandelion, on the lawns. Also, Gilbert would have been disappointed had the drawing-room, into which he was shown by a middle-aged servant, who seemed astonished at seeing a stranger at the door, been otherwise than oppressively neat and tidy. The room had the close smell which belongs to a place never used, whose windows are only open two or three times a week. It was furnished in the ancient manner, with fancy cane chairs of fragile build, heavy chairs in leather and gold, a round table, at which were disposed, at regular intervals, old keepsakes, books of sermons, and little cases of daguerreotypes. Nothing in the room showed marks of wear, but everything was touched with years faded and out of date: the carpet, the hearth-rug, the cover of the sofa, the gilt frames of the pictures, the paper on the wall, the very ornaments of the mantelshelf had lost their early colours, and seemed to have mournfully accepted a common neutral tint, a faded hue which, somehow, as the eye wandered from one thing to the other, harmonized with the old-fashioned room, though the blurred combination was no colour at all, but like the mess which a schoolboy would make upon the palette after he had been painting engravings with a box of water-colours.

Gilbert had plenty of time to meditate on the flight of time and the joylessness of faded furniture, because Miss Nethersole was taking tea, and thought it consistent with her dignity to continue the meal without hurrying herself. A strange young man, probably sent on some charitable quest, might surely wait. He waited, therefore; when he had finished examining the room, he transferred his attention to his own boots, which he was disgusted to find were covered with dust, and, therefore, very much out of keeping with the prim and clean surroundings. When the mistress of the house came at last, too, she was so

completely in harmony with her own house, that Gilbert blushed still more to think of his dusty boots, and hoped she would not notice them. She was dressed in black; her features were worn and pale; her hair was brushed with a curious neatness; she wore a black lace scarf round her neck. Her face had that inward look upon it which comes to those who sit alone a great deal and think, not of things worldly and ambitious, but of themselves and their own folk. People in the country do continually think of themselves and their own peculiarities and eccentricities; their greatness, their importance, and their position. In their own eyes, the family which has never produced a single man of more than ordinary capacity, which has never once been heard of outside the parochial bounds, becomes invested with a profound and singular interest. All the world must be acquainted with it; all the world must wonder at it; all the world must be glad to hear the details of its history. Miss Nethersole by no means belonged to a county family, but it is not necessary to be well-born to possess family pride. She thought highly of her name, she shared the weaknesses of those who were socially above her, and was proud of herself and of her people, though her father made his money in trade, and her cousins, still making more, were not ashamed of the counter and the till.

'You are Mr. Gilbert Yorke?' she asked; 'the name carries no associations with it, that I can remember. May I ask your business?'

'Certainly,' said Gilbert. 'I suppose that you have never heard my name before, and that matters very little. I am here, however, on business of the highest importance.'

'Will you state that business?'

She remained standing, and did not offer him a chair.

'It is connected with two visits which you paid in London. One of them was to Mr. Anthony Hamblin, the day before his death, when you left with him a written statement——this. I have brought it with me.'

He produced the roll, which Miss Nethersole opened and looked at.

'"The Journal of a Deserted Wife." Yes; I left it with him. You can keep it; you can read it. You are welcome to lend it to all his friends and relations. Let all the world read it; so that there may not be one who shall not learn what manner of man this Anthony Hamblin—hypocrite and murderer—was.'

Gilbert received the roll of paper from her, and went on, with admiration of a hatred so lively, and so unaffected:

'The second visit was one which you made to the office of Anthony Hamblin and Company in the City. You there saw

the two partners, Messrs. Augustus and William Hamblin, and made a statement to them.'

'I did. Have they communicated to you the particulars of that interview?'

'I believe so.'

'They told you about the forged receipts?'

'I know all about the forged receipts,' said Gilbert.

'Then with that manuscript, and that little story in your hands, you have ample materials to amuse yourself and your brother clerks. I presume you used to respect your master, Mr. Anthony Hamblin, very much?'

'I respected him very much,' Gilbert replied, passing over the supposition that he was a City clerk. 'I respect him still: even after reading this document and hearing about the forged receipts.'

'In that case,' she returned, with a look of asperity, 'you would respect Judas Iscariot himself.'

Gilbert laughed.

'Well, sir, you who respect forgers and wife-murderers, what have your masters sent you to tell me?'

Gilbert reddened. It is pardonable for a member of the Inner Temple not altogether to like being taken for a messenger from a City house.

'It is quite immaterial, of course,' he said meekly, 'and a mere matter of unimportant detail. But I am not one of the clerks; I am a barrister, and am acting in this business merely as a friend of the family.'

'Very well, sir; it does not concern me whether you are a clerk or not. Pray go on. Have you come to offer me the money of which I was robbed? I paid for each of those six pieces of forged writing, one hundred and fifty pounds. I make four per cent. on my investments, and I have calculated out my loss at compound interest. It comes to £1,398 10s. 4d. I shall look to receive that amount from the estate of the deceased robber and forger.'

'Very well, Miss Nethersole; I am sure that your claim will be fully considered when the time comes, and that you will be satisfied by the conduct of Mr. Anthony Hamblin's executors. Justice will of course be done.'

'That, alas, is impossible!' said Miss Nethersole, with a heavy sigh; 'the only justice that would meet this case would be fourteen years in Portland Prison. The accident on the ice prevented that.'

Gilbert made no reply. This persistent harping on the lost revenge jarred upon him.

'But if you have not brought the money,' she asked, 'what are you here for? Is it only to tell me that you have not

brought it? And remember, I have not promised to give up the papers.'

'I am here, first of all, to tell you that I have been to Bournemouth on the part of the family, and verified your statement as to the grave of Mrs. Hamblin.'

'Did the man think I invented the story of the grave? This is mere childishness.'

'By no means. But it was only necessary to proceed step by step. You forget that when you saw the partners in the firm you were unable to tell them where the marriage took place.'

'I suppose,' said Miss Nethersole, 'that it would be easy to find out. But what is the good of looking for it? I am the only person interested, and I am quite content with my sister's statement that she was married.'

'We had not even that assurance,' said Gilbert. 'Will you kindly show it to me?'

'Why should I?' asked the lady; 'I have no interest in the matter. I have failed in getting justice.'

There was, however, one reason why she should yield. Before her stood a young man of singularly pleasing and attractive appearance. His eyes were fixed on hers. They were eyes which had depths of possible pleading in them; and his voice was low and musical, a sweet baritone; the kind of young man whom young women delight to tease, but whom no middle-aged woman can resist.

'You would show me your sister's letter; you would even give me the letter, if you knew all,' said Gilbert; 'I assure you that you have a great deal to learn—how much I cannot tell you yet.'

The lady opened a desk which stood on a cabinet behind her, and took out a little bundle of faded and yellow documents.

'What can there be to learn,' she asked, 'beyond the dreadful truth which I know already? How can I tell that you are not deceiving me?'

'I am not, indeed,' said Gilbert; 'very shortly you will acknowledge that. Help me to make it quite clear by showing me whatever letters you may possess from your sister after her marriage.'

Miss Nethersole took a paper from the bundle, and held it in her hand, looking at it with eyes which seemed as if they only wanted tears to make them beautiful. Poor wasted womanhood of fifty-five! It must be hard to give up the possession of beauty and comeliness. Some men are always handsome; but only those women who have achieved marriage and motherhood, and receive reflected life from children, handsome sons

and beautiful daughters. She held the letter in her hand, and looked at it with lingering and softened eyes.

'This was the very room,' she murmured, 'in which, one-and-twenty years ago, the two young men, my sister Dora, and I, used to sit in the summer evenings, when they came here to talk, and sing, and tell us of the world of which we knew so little, and steal away——a woman's heart.'

Gilbert said nothing; he let her go on recalling the past; he watched her soften under the influence of memory.

'It was in July. We were all young together. Anthony Hamblin was about my age, or a little older. Stephen, his brother, the young man who smoked tobacco, was twenty-four, Dora was a great deal younger, she was nothing but a mere child. I never suspected that for such a girl——'

She stopped and blushed. Gilbert thought this hard-featured woman must have been pretty once.

'Well, I was deceived; they ran away, Anthony and Dora. They left me, and two days afterwards I received this letter. Yes, you may read it.'

Gilbert read. It was as follows, and was dated from Lulworth; a quite simple, girlish, inexperienced letter:

'DEAREST RACHEL,

'I write to tell you that I have taken the irrevocable step, which you will, I hope, forgive when you understand that it means happiness to me. Perhaps at first you will disapprove because I ran away; I hope, however, you will soon come round, and receive us with a sisterly affection. We are staying here together in the most delightful, and most quiet place in the world. My husband joins with me in asking your forgiveness.

'I remain,

'Always your affectionate sister,

'DORA HAMBLIN.'

'May I borrow it of you?' he asked, folding it up again; 'you shall have it back.'

Miss Nethersole hesitated.

'Tell me first,' she said, 'what you mean by having things to tell me.'

'No,' Gilbert replied, 'I cannot tell you yet. May I keep this letter?'

'When my sister went away, when I understood that she was really gone for good,' said Miss Nethersole, 'I came into this room and I put everything just as it was on the day before she left me—the books on the table, the chairs in their places, the curtains half drawn. I said: "This room shall remind me of Dora; it shall cry out always against the man who robbed

me of her." I have never used the room since that day. You are the only man who has been in it for twenty years and more, and when I have come into the room it has been to recall the memory of the betrayer of women : Anthony Hamblin.'

'Give me that letter,' Gilbert persisted. 'I tell you again, that you have much to learn. I have a great surprise for you.'

'What is it, your great surprise ?'

'I cannot tell you yet,' he replied. 'It may be many days before I tell you ; but give me that letter. I do not want it to complete my case, but I should like to have it to show one to whom your sister's memory is very dear.'

She handed him the letter almost meekly. She *could* not resist this young man with the soft voice and the pleading eyes.

'Take it,' she sighed. 'How foolish I am to trust any man after my experience, and you a complete stranger.'

'Tell me,' he said ; 'you have long since forgiven your sister ?'

'Long since ; I prayed for her morning and night at family devotions. It would have been unchristian not to forgive so great a sinner. I prayed for her unwittingly, even six years after her death. I hope the Papistic superstition of praying for the dead will not be laid to my charge.'

'I am sure,' said Gilbert, wondering at the remarkable religion of this good lady, 'I am sure it will not. At least, I wish I had no greater sins upon my soul than praying for the dead. But as for her husband, can you not forgive him too ?'

'I do not know.' Truth for the moment overcame the cant of her party. 'I do not know. I hope I can. Only,' she added, in justification of herself, 'when I learned at Bournemouth the death of my sister, when I found the journal, when I understood his miserable wickedness, when I discovered the six years' forgeries, I felt the old resentment rise in my heart, and then I knew that I was called and chosen—as an Instrument.' She sat down wearily. 'I expected to be an Instrument for a great and signal punishment.'

'I see ; but you were, perhaps, mistaken.'

'No, not all. I was permitted to see him, to point out to him his awful condition, to reason with him as one reasons with unrepentant sinners, to be faithful to him. It was the last word, the last chance. Perhaps—it may be—he repented in the night.'

Gilbert laid the letter in his pocket-book.

'I will tell you something, Miss Nethersole,' he said. 'But remember, this is not all I have to tell you, later on. I have here your sister's register of marriage, I have this letter to you, and I have the proof of her death. I have—and that is the most important thing I can tell you to-day—I have also the register of the birth of her daughter.'

'Of what?' Miss Nethersole sprang from her chair. 'Of *what?*'

'Of a daughter. Did you not know that your sister had a daughter?'

'No, I did not. Dora's child? Her daughter? I heard nothing about any child at Bournemouth.'

'Unfortunately,' said Gilbert, 'your sister became light-headed when she got there, and died without quite recovering her mind, so that she never talked about her child. I have brought with me,' he added, diving into his pocket, 'a little thing, the only thing, which the child inherited from her mother.' He produced the coral necklace.

Miss Nethersole took it with trembling fingers. There *were*, then, fountains of tears behind those hard eyes.

'It was my sister's,' she said. 'She used to wear it always. She was so fond of gauds and trinkets, poor child! I know it well—oh! I know it.' The tears came to her eyes, and she was fain to sob.

'Go on,' she said, almost fiercely. 'Tell me more about the child—Dora's child.'

'The child was taken away from Lulworth by Anthony Hamblin——'

'The wife-murderer and forger!'

'And brought up first of all at Brighton—afterwards at his house on Clapham Common. That night when you called upon him she was there too, with a party of children and cousins, singing and dancing.'

'I heard them singing,' murmured Miss Nethersole, with softened voice. 'Her voice, too, I suppose I heard. Tell me, was there any difference made between her and Anthony Hamblin's other children?'

'What other children?'

'His children by his second marriage.'

'But he made no second marriage. Anthony Hamblin lived alone in his house with your niece and his cousin, a lady who was her governess and companion.'

Miss Nethersole was silent for a few moments, reflecting. Here was an upsetting of the ideas which had filled her mind and fed her spirit of revenge for so long a time. She had pictured Anthony Hamblin the husband of a happy and comfortable wife, with a distinct leaning in the direction of luxury. She had thought of him as the father of a large family. She thought the singers whom she had heard on the night of her visit were the sons and daughters. In her blind yearning for revenge she dwelt with complacency on the misery and shame which would fall upon the children when she struck the father. Now it all came home to her. If she was, as she began to doubt,

with a horrible, cold feeling, as if there was no reality left in the world, and everything was mockery, an Instrument, it was a weapon for the punishment of the innocent with the guilty, the poor child who would have called Dora mother, with the man who was her father.

'What is her name?' she asked presently, abashed and confused.

'She is named Alison,' said Gilbert; 'the register of her baptism is in the church at Lulworth.'

'Alison, that was my mother's name,' said Miss Nethersole.

She was silent again.

Then Gilbert went on pleading with his deep, earnest eyes, and his soft, earnest voice:

'You did not know of this, else you would have gone to Anthony Hamblin in sorrow, not in anger. You would have appealed to his love for Alison, to the girl's love for him, to all that was kind and tender in his nature; you would have suffered the past to be forgotten; you would not have written that introduction to this "Journal of a Deserted Wife;" you would have asked for an explanation.'

'No explanation,' said Miss Nethersole, quickly, 'was wanted. There, at least, I was right. The paper explained itself.'

'I am prepared, but not to-day, with quite another explanation,' said Gilbert. 'You would, if you had known what you know to-day, have paved the way for a reconciliation by means of Alison. You would have learned by loving your niece, to forgive her father.'

'I never could! That is, as a Christian I must, as a woman of course I could not.' Like many estimable people, Miss Nethersole separated Christianity from humanity. 'Why, Mr. Yorke, you cannot forget, you surely cannot forget the forgeries?'

'I do not,' he replied; 'I am coming to them. You would, out of consideration for your niece, not only have abstained from acting in the matter; you would not only have resolved to say nothing about them to the outside world, but you would have given him an opportunity for explaining the whole thing.'

'Explaining! How can you explain a forgery?'

'There are many ways. I can give you a complete explanation, but not yet. Remember, however, what you have told me he said when you went away. That if you persisted in the course you proposed to take, you would go in sorrow and repentance all the days of your life. You have not persisted. But knowing now that you have a niece, that she lived with Anthony Hamblin and loved him tenderly, can you doubt that he was right?'

'But he was a forger! a forger! a forger!'

'Miss Nethersole, he *was not!*' Gilbert held out a warning

finger. 'He *was no forger!* I shall not explain now. This is not the time for explanation; there are many things to do first. But I tell you solemnly, on the word of a gentleman, on the word of a Christian, that Anthony Hamblin was not, could not be, the criminal you think him.'

Miss Nethersole shook her head, but not unkindly. Only she could not understand.

'And pray,' she said, 'who are you that take so keen an interest in this affair?'

'I am engaged to Alison,' said Gilbert, simply. 'Miss Nethersole,' he took her hand and kissed it, 'I hope before long to call you my aunt.'

The poor lady was quite broken down by this last touch of human kindness.

'I have been working,' he said, 'to restore to Alison her own good name, which has been threatened. I have had to establish the fact that her mother was married.'

'Why, who could have doubted that?' asked Miss Nethersole.

'It is a long story. However, so far, that is established. The poor girl will not have to blush for her mother, at least; whether she will have to be ashamed of her father depends upon you, my dear lady.'

'On me? You mean about those forgeries?'

'Surely.'

Miss Nethersole hesitated.

'Do you want me to give them up? But you have not explained.'

'I cannot explain at this moment. Entrust them to me, and they shall be placed in the care of Mr. Augustus Hamblin, senior partner in the same house. Believe me, Miss Nethersole, if you give them to me, you will never repent it.'

Miss Nethersole was fast melting.

'What is she like—my niece?'

'She is the best and most beautiful of girls,' replied Gilbert, with natural warmth; 'she is a Rose of Sharon, a Lily of Jericho.'

'Do not quote Scripture irreverently, young man,' said Miss Nethersole, with a smile in those eyes of hers which had been so hard. 'You are, I suppose, in love with her, and you fancy that she is an angel. No woman is an angel, sir. However, you shall have the receipts.' She said this with an obvious effort. 'I will give them to you—for Alison's sake, when I have made the acquaintance of my niece. Meantime you may take the photographic copies. And now, sir, God requite you as you and yours deal with her.'

She choked, and sat down with her handkerchief to her eyes.

'Give me a few days, my dear lady,' said Gilbert; 'yet a few

days and I will ask you to make her acquaintance, and to hear the explanation of what at present you do not understand. My Alison shall thank you. Miss Nethersole, you have this day exercised the highest of Christian virtues. You have forgiven and forgotten. The young life, the newly-born love, has drawn out the old death—the old hatred.'

Gilbert returned to London that same evening, his task completed, his work done.

Was it well done? What would be the end? What would Alison think?

One thing alone remained.

Early next morning he paid a visit to the bank where the receipts had been exchanged for cash. He had an interview with one of the managers. There were references to old books, and examination of certain senior clerks. The sequel appeared to be satisfactory, for when Gilbert left the bank his face was more than usually sunny.

Finally, he sought the office of Anthony Hamblin and Co., and set forth in detail the whole of his discoveries.

And then there was a discussion long and serious.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW YOUNG NICK KEPT HIS SECRET.

THE consciousness of possessing all to himself so great a secret gave young Nick a sense of superior importance most enjoyable. He hugged it to his bosom, took it to bed with him, and dreamed of it, never let it go out of his thoughts. His mother observed with some alarm that her son was changed during those days. He was sobered; he carried himself responsibly; his white eyebrows were charged with a burden of duty.

The change was certainly for the better, but she looked for some physical cause to account for his sudden abandonment of those impish moods which had once kept her in continual alarm. It might be impending measles; in fact, the boy was completely weighed down by his knowledge. The writing-master of Jubilee Road was too much in his mind. Whenever he saw Alison he thought of him; if he went out of the town he reflected that the Clapham Road, followed due north, leads to London Bridge, and that from London Bridge to Jubilee Road is but a step; if he came home, he passed the door of his uncle's study, and involuntarily compared the mean lodging at the East End with

that stately room; if he heard his mother lamenting the wickedness of Stephen, he chuckled, thinking how that wicked man would be, and should be, some day brought to shame, and his wiles defeated: if he heard Alison whispering despondently that nothing had been as yet discovered, he rubbed his hands together, and laughed inwardly, winking both eyes alternately, as he thought of what he himself had discovered; if he contemplated his own future prospects, his thoughts turned to the refugee whose return was to mark the commencement of his own fortunes.

The thing was overwhelming. All day he pondered over it, now with exultation, now with anxiety. His performances at school grew every day more lamentable; the subjunctive mood ceased to interest him, and he neglected the past participle; even the things which would certainly become of real use to him when he had his desk in Great St. Simon the Apostle, his arithmetic, his French, his handwriting, became irksome. For as the weary hours of work crept on, his mind was always away in that dingy house of Jubilee Road, and his thoughts were always turning to the Great Secret.

How was it to be disclosed in the most useful and, at the same time, the most striking manner? Suppose some one else, a clerk in the house, for instance, should find out the writing-master of Jubilee Road. His uncle, Nicolas reflected with severity, was extremely thoughtless; he might even, on a Saturday half-holiday, stroll as far west as the entrance to the docks, and there be observed by the policemen at the doors, and then all his own share in the discovery would be actually fooled away.

These were difficult and interesting problems, but they were too much for the young brain. While Nicolas thought them over, which was all day long, in school and out, the book before him became a blank page; the common he wandered over, as any Robinson Crusoe, was as if it did not exist; the shouts of the boys at play, or the hum of the boys at work, fell on deaf ears. His school performances during this period were in the monthly report described as disgraceful. He cared nothing about Cæsar's triumphs in Gaul; he could not be roused to any interest in any subject whatever; the ceaseless admonitions of his masters produced no more effect than the lowing of distant cattle; if Cridland was called, Cridland had to be jogged by his nearest neighbour; if Cridland was asked a question, his reply betrayed not only ignorance of the subject, but gross inattention. The consequences were inevitable.

Must one go on? At that school they caned, but only in cases of continued inattention and idleness.

When the patience of the authorities was quite exhausted,

Cridland received orders to remain after twelve o'clock. It need scarcely be observed that the fact of such a boy as young Nick, the crafty, the subtle, the hitherto successful invader of rules, being about to undergo the last extremity of the law, excited an interest so lively as to be akin to joy. In fact, it was joy—rapturous joy. When the hour of fate struck, the boys, instead of rushing off to play as usual, congregated about the door, listening in silence. Would young Nick take it plucky, or would young Nick funk? Would he cry out, or would he be silent?

They watched him march, with pale face, but head erect, into the operating-room; they listened while, after a pause, during which, as the more experienced knew, the head-master was delivering himself of the preliminary jaw. At last, the sound of the Instrument was heard: swish! swish! swish! No other sound, no cry, no trampling of feet.

'I always run round and round,' said young Featherbrain, who was caned once a fortnight regularly.

'Nine cuts,' said Lackwit secundus; 'two more than I got last time.'

But, throughout, a dignified silence.

Then the door opened, and young Nick came out. His head was as erect as usual, though his cheek was a little flushed, and his eyes brighter, perhaps. The boys made a lane. Young Nick looked neither to the right nor to the left, though a murmur of sympathetic admiration greeted him as he emerged; but taking his hat from the peg, he walked away with pride, capping the head-master at the gate with a dignified smile, which seemed to say:

'You have done your duty; I forgive you. Let us agree in forgetting the late deplorable scene.'

Then the boys fell to discussing their own experiences, and the punishment of young Nick served for the rest of the day as a fillip or stimulus to the activity of the school life.

That night, after dark, any curious passer-by might have noticed a small, thin figure creep through the iron railings, and flit rapidly across the gravel to the back of the school. There was a window at that part of the building which might be opened from the outside, did one know the secret. Through that window the thin figure crept.

The next day, which was Wednesday, and a half-holiday, was a day of rebuke. The masters were late at prayers, and a general feeling rapidly spread that something was going to happen. In fact it had been discovered that the gowns had been sewn together with such great artfulness that they could not be separated without much labour and time. The masters appeared, therefore, without them. The head-master was ob-

served to put less heart than usual into the petition for forgiveness. After prayers he announced that an outrage had been committed on the sacred magisterial robes, and that he would give the offender until twelve to confess. The eyes of all involuntarily turned to young Nick, who only gazed upwards thoughtfully, and shook his head with sadness. Worse things happened: it was immediately afterwards found that the masters' seats had been plentifully studded with small pieces of cobbler's wax: that the ink for all the desks had been powdered with chalk, that the nibs of all the pens had been cut or broken off; that butter, or some such foreign substance, had been rubbed upon the black-boards: that mark-books had been shamefully treated, and the records of impositions mutilated.

Three boys were caned, for minor offences, at twelve; no confessor appeared at that hour: the whole school was detained till one; the whole school was also deprived of its half-holiday; three more were caned at five. Young Nick continued grave and sad; he shook his head from time to time; but in the afternoon he recovered his spirits, showed a cheerfulness strange to the rest, and displayed the greatest alacrity in his work. At five o'clock, when they were dismissed, he laughed. This episode cheered him for the moment, but he relapsed, and became mysteriously preoccupied again. His thoughts were not with his studies: he lost the good opinion of his masters—a consequence of sin, the true awfulness of which has been revealed by the author of 'Eric'—he made his fellows think he was going silly, because a young Nick who had no more mischief in him, who never said or did anything worthy of his former reputation, who had gone quite silent and sluggish, was not the young Nick whom they had formerly admired. That boy had gone, vanished into the *Ewigkeit*. There was left in his place a quiet lad with white hair and eyebrows, pink face, and downcast look, who moved among them as speechless as a ghost, who never listened, who was always dreaming or asleep, who made no fuss, played no pranks, and took no notice. Quite a stupid and commonplace boy. Indeed the secret was too much for him. Had its exclusive possession been much longer prolonged, I believe the boy would have suffered some kind of brain affection.

There were moments when the story presented itself to him in its comic aspect. The reflection that the man for whom so many tears had been shed, whose death had caused so much unexpected trouble, was really alive and well, stimulated Nicolas to dance and sing, to utter dark sayings, to construct enigmas, and to behave in Puck-like fashion towards Alison. She had no suspicion of his meaning, but she began to feel every day that the boy had some secret, and meant something real. And

what did he mean by his constant allusions to the writing-master?

In those days he made a 'Ballad of the Writing-master,' of which I only venture to quote the first two verses; would that all poets were content with publishing only the first two verses!

'The Writing-master sings upon his way,
Of Gillott, J., soft nib, and pliant quill;
His Round and Text like twins together play;
His frolic Small-hand keeps him happy still.
He sings all day about his merry task;
He dances on the curbstone when he's free;
Give me his lot, should you the question ask:—
A writing-master's is the life for me.

'He loves his boys—their master they adore;
He rolls in wealth, his reputation's such:
At five o'clock when he can work no more,
Often the Lord Mayor asks him out, and much.
"There goes the Writing-master!" cry the girls,
"Oh! great, and grand, and rich, and proud is he.
Let others wed for rings and things and pearls:
'Tis, oh! a writing-master's wife to be."'

There were many more verses hammered out by this young poet on the same subject; but I refrain from quoting those that followed. He sang the whole right through one afternoon for Alison's pleasure, pretending he did not know she was in the room. He was, indeed, very crafty in those minor pretences which deceived no one.

'Will you tell me, you tiresome boy,' asked Alison, worried by his iteration, 'what you mean by perpetually talking about writing-masters?'

'If you chose a profession,' the boy replied, with another question, 'wouldn't you like that?'

'Certainly not,' said Alison. 'I would prefer anything, almost, to such a profession. What *do* you mean?'

'Not be a writing-master? Why, of all the unreasonable girls! If you only knew—consider, Alison.'

He began to sing his song again.

The boy would give no fuller explanation.

Another remarkable circumstance. He took to coming home late for tea on Saturdays, and sometimes did not appear until supper was the only meal possible. And although he grew absolutely grasping after pocket-money, he never spent any on 'tuck,' and yet never seemed to have any.

One Sunday—it was the first Sunday after they put up the tablet to the memory of Anthony Hamblin in the parish church—he disgraced the family altogether, for at sight of the tablet this ill-behaved and unfeeling boy began to laugh. That was at the commencement of the service; he laughed again when

they stood up for the Psalms, he choked loudly several times during the sermon, and he laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks all the way home across the Common. Alison had never been so angry with him. Why he laughed the boy would not, or could not, tell. But he refused to go to church for the evening service, on the ground that he felt it coming on again.

The reason why he came home late on Saturdays, and had no pocket-money, was, first that he spent that afternoon with his uncle, and secondly, that he used all his pocket-money in purchasing little presents to cheer his solitude and poverty. And I declare that although the boy was as selfish as most boys of fourteen, and although he looked to his uncle's return for the foundation of his own fortune, he was in this respect entirely disinterested. He could never think of those shabby boots, that worn coat, without a choking at the throat, and something like a tear in his eye, signs of emotion which he was fain to hide or efface as speedily as might be.

For his own part, Anthony, having quickly learned to trust the boy, looked forward to his weekly visit as to a break in the desolate monotony in his new existence. He sat at home and waited for him, growing anxious if he was late, and when he arrived there was a formal sort of catechism to be gone through.

'How is Alison?' asked her father.

'Chirpy,' said young Nick; 'takes her meals hearty.'

'Have they made any discovery yet?'

'Not yet,' replied the boy; 'and I hope they never will.'

That meant that the search, so far as he could tell, was as yet unsuccessful: so far, therefore, the chances were in favour of Stephen. This was just what the boy wanted.

Then they would sit down and talk about other things, the possibility of return being always in both their minds. The old relations between them were a great deal changed. The man and the boy thus thrown together under changed conditions were on the same level, in conversation. Young Nick never let his uncle forget that his secret gave him authority, so to speak; nor could Anthony ever forget that his present work and position afforded a striking contrast to his former. Indeed, Anthony's reverses might be compared with those of Hecuba, Crœsus, and other fallen monarchs, some of whom taught in schools. Louis Philippe and Dionysius, for instance. But then Louis Philippe went back again. He might, had he chosen, have taken a high moral line, and pointed out to Nicolas that the misfortunes of one man should be taken as a warning to other men. He omitted the opportunity, however, and the moral lesson was lost.

'Tell me how you like your work, Uncle Anthony,' said the boy with a grin. 'Your work!—ho, ho!'

It was the one disagreeable thing to Anthony about these interviews, that young Nick would persist in alluding to his occupation.

Anthony grunted.

'Do you find your principal always—ahem!—what a gentlemanly principal ought to be?'

Anthony preserved silence.

'Do you like your boys? Are they a pleasant lot of fellows with a good tone and above meanness or falsehood?'

Anthony shook his head.

'Well, then, tell me what you do.'

'You mean the day's routine?' He blushed almost like a boy, this man of fifty and more, while he related the daily duties of an usher in a commercial academy. 'We begin at nine: there are two assistants, Mr. Merkin and myself. The principal takes the senior class, which does Latin. I do the writing, drawing (which is an extra—for the principal), and the geography and English. Mr. Merkin, who is young, and will probably succeed the principal, takes the French and the book-keeping, the history, the lower Latin, and the mathematics. There are sixty boys in the school, and they pay six pounds a year each for their education without extras, which are French, drawing, and book-keeping—a guinea a year each for those.'

'I see,' said young Nick. 'Boss pockets extras. Go on.'

'We work from nine to twelve, and from two to five. In the morning there is punishment school from twelve to one, and on Wednesday afternoons.'

'And what do they pay you for all this?'

'Seventy-five pounds a year, non-resident. You see, Nicolas, I have been used to live pretty much as I liked, and I preferred to be free in the evening. Then I have to look over exercises; but at least I can go to bed when I like, and smoke a pipe if I please.'

This poor dole of independence, this limited portion of freedom, produced a great wave of pity in the heart of the boy.

'As for the boys,' Anthony continued, with a sigh, 'I must own that they are wearying. Unfortunately, one cannot expect the ideas of gentlemen in the—the East End of London. However, all boys are alike, I dare say. One tries to inspire them with something like principle and morality——'

'Might as well teach an oyster to climb a tree,' said young Nick, speaking from his own experience of boys; 'clout 'em and cuff 'em. Go on, uncle.'

'But it is uphill work. As for the teaching, there are, I think, some boys who really want to learn.'

'They know it pays,' observed Nick the sagacious. 'I'm one of those boys. Teach me what will pay, and I will learn. Not past participles—yah!'

'Then there are the punishments. The principal conducts them personally.'

'Like Cook and Gaze,' said Nicolas, poetically. 'I should like to conduct *him* personally, and one or two more principals that I know.'

This dark and unintelligible reflection was probably due to the still fresh—too fresh—recollection of his own recent sufferings.

'I wish,' continued Anthony sadly, 'that there were more judgment shown in inflicting the punishments, and perhaps more dignity in the manner of operation. But one has no right to talk openly of the conduct of one's employers. You will forget, Nicolas, that I mentioned these things. It might do me serious injury if you talked.'

'All right, uncle,' said Nicolas, grinning. 'I won't mention it. Keep steaming ahead.'

'There is nothing more to be said. We are having a little difference just now, the principal and myself, because he wants me to undertake some of the canings. And I—well, I would rather not.'

'Naturally,' said Nicolas, wagging his head. 'Uncle Stephen might be told off to do that. Of course you couldn't.'

Anthony, reminded by mention of his brother's name that he was not by deliberate choice and training a writing-master, relapsed into silence.

This was the kind of conversation which they held with each other every Saturday, varied by the latest talk about Clapham, and the views of Nicolas on things universal.

One day, about a month after the discovery, Anthony confessed to the boy that he had a burning desire to see the old place again, and his daughter.

'Take me down with you to-night,' he said. 'Place me so that I can see without being seen, and then bring out Alison so that I may, if only for the last time, look upon her face.'

'As for its being the last time,' said Nicolas, 'that's gammon, and you know it. I am going to bring you home in triumph, while the bells do ring and the drums do beat. As for trotting her out for you to look at her, that's easy done. As for putting you where she can't see you, that's not so easy. Let me think!'

He reflected seriously for a few moments.

'To-day,' he said, 'is Saturday. Gilbert Yorke will very likely turn up to-night, with his pocket-book full of no news. You must not come to-night. But on Monday he will be off again. He travels about the country and finds nothing, while Alderney Codd goes round the town and finds nothing. Now, if they

had only come to Me in the first place, I could have shown them how to go to work. See what I've found——You!'

He spoke as if his discovery was entirely due to his superior intelligence and forethought.

'Well—Monday. Shall I venture to Clapham on Monday evening?'

'On Monday evening you be about the place. Let me see—you musn't be in the gardens or in the front of the house. It's awfully dangerous. Buy a false nose and a moustache—put on the green goggles—tie a red comforter round your throat. Lord! suppose anybody was to see you! Why, where would my credit be? Be outside the house, in the road, or on the Common in front, but not far off, as the clock strikes nine. I will do what I can for you, but I can't promise.'

On the following Monday evening, which was fortunately fine, Anthony, observing every possible precaution in the way of disguise, walked once more over the old familiar Clapham Common. He felt terribly guilty and was full of apprehensions. Every passer-by seemed to scrutinise him with suspicion; the policeman turned his lantern upon him; the men whom he met edged away from him; in fact, the effect of the green spectacles, the red handkerchief, and the slouched hat was theatrically suggestive. No brigand in a burlesque looked more ostentatiously disguised.

It was nine o'clock as he drew near the old house.

For a moment he felt as if the past four months was all a delusion and a dream. He was going to walk in as of old. He would find the study fire lit, his slippers in their old place, his box of cigars ready to hand, his book upon the table, and Alison to talk to him. Involuntarily he drew himself up, stepped out quickly, and gained the garden-gate. There he was arrested by the boy, whose white locks gleamed in the twilight.

'Hush!' whispered young Nick, looking about him with jealousy, though he greatly enjoyed the intrigue; no one is about now, but there's precious little safety. William, the groom, keeps company with Anne, the kitchenmaid; sometimes they're in the scullery, and sometimes they're about the stables, and they may be prowling round, as they were last night, in the road; there's no telling. You walk very gently to the other gate, while I look round again. I'll meet you there.'

The boy made a rapid reconnaissance. While he examined the shrubs in the front garden, Anthony stood outside the railings, and looked upon what had been his own. The front door was wide open, and the blaze of light looked to the hungry exile like an invitation to return to home, and love, and Alison.

'Come,' said Nicolas, catching him by the wrist, 'you stand behind the trunk of the cedar, that's the blackest place in the

garden. You can see into the drawing room from there. I'll bring Alison to the window; you wait quiet and don't move. If William and Anne come spooning here to-night, interrupting things, I'll give them cold pig or something worse, see if I don't.'

The boy left his uncle planted by the tree, and retreated to the house. Alison was sitting with his mother, reading by the light of a single small lamp: there was a small fire on the hearth, and no other light in the place. Nicolas immediately mounted on a chair, and lit up all the burners nearest the window.

'More light,' he said: 'I want to tackle the subjunctive mood. It's what the novelists call a dark mood, a moody mood, a melancholy mood, that wants all the light we can get.'

Then he opened the shutters, drew back the curtains, and threw up the window.

'More air,' he said; 'that's for the past participle.' Presently he whispered—it was rather a loud whisper—'Alison!'

'What is it, Nicolas?'

She laid down the book and lifted her head.

'Come here.'

'I am too comfortable, thank you. Pray shut the window. And you cannot want all that glare of light.'

'You would come—I think—if you knew who was outside, and wanted to see you. But don't come unless you like; *he* won't care really, whether he sees you to-night or not. It's nothing to him; oh no!'

'Don't be silly, Nicolas.'

But she smiled and listened.

'G—i—l. There you are with your Gil.'

Alison sprang from her chair and ran to the window. The light was full upon her face as she stood there looking out into the garden, right before the branches of the great dark cedar, so that a man beneath the tree could almost reach out his hand and touch her.

'Gilbert is not there,' she said to young Nick, drawing back disappointed.

'I didn't say he was,' replied the boy, shutting the window and the shutters; 'I only said G—i—l, Gil. That's all. You made up the rest.'

'You are a mischievous little imp,' she said, 'and you ought to have your ears boxed.'

She went back to her book. Nicolas turned down some of the lights and went out of the room. No one ever ventured to interfere with his movements.

He found his uncle Anthony still under the cedar.

'Come,' whispered the boy, 'you mustn't be found here. It is not only William and Anne, it's Robert the gardener, and

Eliza the cook, as well. Lord! what I've had to look after since you ran away! You ought to have thought of me before you did it. Now then; you've seen Alison, and I can't have you loitering about here, getting caught, and you had better get away back to Jubilee Road as fast as you can.'

Anthony touched the boy's cheek with his finger, and said nothing. By the light of the gas in the hall, Nicolas saw that his eyes were heavy with tears.

'She looks more beautiful than ever,' he replied.

'Now you see what you've given up, uncle, and I hope you're properly sorry,' said Nicolas with severity. 'You've just chucked away and lost the most scrumptious girl in all Clapham—your own daughter, too; the best house in the place, the best cellar of wine, and my society.'

'Yes, yes,' Anthony replied; 'I know, I know.'

'There's still a door open. Come back to us. I, for one, will never say a word to reproach you, or recall the past. Remember, uncle, there's always a knife and fork ready for you.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOW JACK BAKER PROPOSED AN AGREEABLE COMPROMISE.

Alison returned home with greater lightness of heart than she had felt since her father's death. It was far more to her than to other girls to have stood beside her mother's grave. She had received an assurance which would at once stay the hand of her enemy, and stop the tongues of those who maligned her father's memory; her lover was come back to her, and again the ring of engagement decorated the third finger of her left hand. Her pride, her self-respect returned to her, and when she ran up the steps of the old house it was with a step as elastic and a face as bright as any that had ever rejoiced the face of her father.

'Dear old house,' she cried, 'I shall not have to leave you after all.'

'Then,' said young Nick, who was there to welcome her, 'I suppose you have squared it at last with Uncle Stephen. A very sensible thing too. Mind, I always offered to square it for you, but you were so uncommonly taken up with that fellow Yorke. Now, I suppose, he's come round to my opinion, and pretends it is his own idea. What's the figure?'

'You are a horrid boy!' Alison would tell him no more.

Said Nicolas, bursting into song,

'Let others wed for rings and things and pearls,
'Tis oh! a Writing-master's wife to be—ee—ee—ee;
A Writing-master's wife—or daughter—or female relation of some kind—
to be.

'You want the writing-master, Alison, my dear? Wait a little—wait a little; he's coming.'

But she was not to be allured into asking any questions, even about the writing-master. She was too happy to be curious.

Her manner excited the boy's liveliest curiosity. At dinner he listened for information, but none was given. After dinner he made haste to spread out all his volumes and dictionaries, and pretended rapt absorption in his studies, hoping that Alison would be betrayed by his assumed concentration of thought into dropping some hint of what had happened. But she did not. She made no mention whatever of her journey and its results. Only she was happy again, happy as a child, and Mrs. Cridland waited patiently to hear the cause. She was told, but not before her son went to bed.

Nicolas was greatly disgusted with this want of confidence; and next day, too, a half-holiday, when he might have told the secret to the writing-master. As it was, he contented himself with a letter in which he merely wrote these words:

'Something up. They've found it out, but they haven't told me yet. Keep up pecker.—N. C.'

The situation—had Mr. Bunter Baker realised what it meant—was unpromising for him to reopen those negotiations which had already been entered upon. They had, however, with one or two other matters, been greatly in his mind for some time. Stephen Hamblin, growing gloomy over the threatened delay, and perhaps suspicious about the movements of the other side, was dogged, and even violent, in his assertions of confidence.

'I tell you,' said Jack, 'they've found out something. She went into the country the other day mysteriously. What did she go for?'

'For change of air, perhaps,' said Stephen. 'What do I care what she went for? Mum, there's nothing to find out.'

'I don't know.' Jack shook his head sagaciously. 'I met Alderney Codd the other day. He said that you were going to be crumpled up.'

'Alderney Codd be hanged! Mind, Jack, I know very well what I am doing. I tell you again that Anthony couldn't have been married.'

Stephen looked worried, but his manner was defiant. In fact, the more uncertain of his own position he became, the more positively he asserted it.

'Ah! well,' Jack went on, 'there are several ways of "crumpling up." If they do not find out the proof of the marriage

they may induce you to retire from the contest; they may buy you out; or they may'—he hesitated a moment, but delicacy of feeling was not one of his strong points—'they may threaten you out.'

'What the devil do you mean?' cried Stephen, his face ablaze. 'Threaten out? Threaten *me* out?'

'Don't fly into a rage.' Jack spoke in his usual loud, yet leisurely fashion. 'I learn a good deal as I go about. For instance, things are being discussed by the clerks at Hamblins' just now, and your name seems to be taken pretty free. Of course I don't know what they say. If I hear I forget. Most likely they are lies. At the same time, Hamblin'—he turned and faced him, looking him straight in the eyes—'I suppose there are few men who have hung about town so long as you, who can't have something raked up.'

'Well?' asked Stephen, sullenly, 'and what then?'

'Oh, nothing; only these things don't look well if you have got to go into a witness-box, do they?'

'It depends upon the things,' Stephen replied, restlessly pacing the room; 'they may rake what they like, so far as I am concerned.'

'That's all right then, and you need not fear. By-the-way, why did you leave the house when you might have stayed in it and become a partner?'

Stephen's face became darker.

'We had a quarrel,' he said; 'a family quarrel.'

'Ah, very likely; only that is not what they say.'

'Confound it, man, let them say what they like! Tell me if it is anything outrageous, and I will have them up for libel.' Stephen looked, however, as if he cared a great deal. 'Of course,' he said, stopping in his walk, 'I should not like my whole life trotted out for public inspection. No man would. Fortunately, however, nobody knows all the shady places except myself. Who knows yours?'

'Nobody at all,' said Jack Baker; 'thank goodness, nobody. I keep the seamy side in. Now you, old fellow, I am afraid, have kept your seamy side a good deal exposed to view. You've gambled, you've gone on the turf, you've been a man about town, you've been a speculator; you've dabbled in finance, you've been mixed up with companies in which the shareholders don't bless the names of the promoters; all these things stick to a fellow. Now I, my dear friend, with the deepest sympathy for your pursuits, have done the same thing, but more quietly; and I'm ten years younger than you, so that I haven't had the time to commit so much wickedness as you. My game has always been to show up as the steady City merchant, respectable and substantial.'

'Well, well, what are we talking about?'

'I have been thinking,' Jack went on in his most business-like way, 'that my thou. looks devilish like being lost. Excuse me disbelieving your statement, Hamblin, which seems to me as if it rested on your own unsupported opinion. I don't see my way to getting that thou. back again; and as for your affairs getting into a more satisfactory state, I have reason to believe, my dear boy, that they ceased to be in any state at all a good while ago. Don't swear, and fly into a rage, because I'm not going to round on you, and I'm not going to say anything a bit nastier than I can help: but if that money is to be paid back out of this Hamblin estate, I think I shall have to whistle for it. Mind I don't precisely know what Alderney Codd means, but I do know that though he is an ass he is not a liar. If he says you are going to be crumpled up, the crumpling will take place as sure as eggs is eggs. Besides, in any case, the judge may keep you waiting for seven years. How are you to live for seven years?'

'You seem determined to drive me mad between you,' said Stephen. 'What does it matter what that infernal ass, Alderney Codd, says or thinks? That won't hurt. As for seven years, of course it is nonsense. Next year we make another application, win the case, and pocket the money. Marriage? That be hanged!'

'I wish I could share your confidence, Hamblin.' Jack's tone became very serious. 'Now I have been turning this over, and I am anxious to see a compromise.'

Stephen groaned.

'A compromise, I say. Listen a moment. That niece of yours is a very pretty girl: she's the finest, prettiest, pluckiest girl I ever set eyes on, or dreamed of. It's a shame that she should be kicked out because she can't find her mother; a shame, by Gad! And yet, of course, old man,' he added, with a touch of the City common sense, 'one can't blame you. Go she must, unless—— However, what I propose is this. You shall withdraw your claim altogether; you shall, in point of fact, acknowledge her legitimacy; you shall abandon all right to the estate. In return, you shall receive half the personal property—half, you see: that is a hundred and fifty thousand pounds—good heavens! what a pile!—and I——'

'Oh! you are to come in, are you?'

Stephen sat down in a kind of desperation, and turned his dark face upon his friend.

'Of course I am. Do you think I ever interest myself for nothing? J. double-B. is going to romp in gaily. My share in the business is to marry the girl, and take the other half of the pile.'

'Oh,' said Stephen, 'this is a very pretty sort of proposal. I am to give you half of my estate, am I?'

'It isn't yours yet. Very likely it never will be yours. You are to exchange quarrelling and fighting for friendship, doubt for certainty, claim for possession. Why, I think it is too much that I offer you. We should say a third, not a half—and J. double-B. takes the girl off your hands, marries her, gives out that you've behaved noble, and sets your character up for life. Think of that now.'

'Perhaps she won't have you,' said Stephen, evidently softening.

'Ha—h'm!' Jack replied, with a sweet smile, stroking his chin and smoothing his moustache, which was a fine full growth. 'We shall see. If a man is not absolutely repulsive, he always has a chance. Hang it, Hamblin, you ought to know the sex.'

Evidently Jack Baker thought he knew it himself. He looked so irresistible, with his confident pose, and his air as of a peacock brandishing an enormous tail, that Stephen laughed aloud.

'Go in and win, if you can,' he said. 'Get engaged to the girl, and then make your terms with me. You may, if you like, feel your way to a compromise. I don't want to be unreasonable. Give me three-fourths or so, and let the thing slide.'

'Yes,' said Jack, 'I should think you *would* let the thing slide for three-fourths. That means over two hundred thousand. Why, there's spending in that for forty years if you managed it properly. You'll be under the turf in twenty. If Alderney meant anything, it is not three-fourths nor one-fourth either that you'll get.'

As a matter of fact, Alderney meant nothing except an expression of profound conviction. Gilbert had not told any one, as yet, the nature and extent of his discoveries. Even Alison only knew that she had stood by the grave of her mother, for whom she might shed tears of sorrow unmixed with shame.

A second time, therefore, Jack Baker drove to the house on Clapham Common. On this occasion, however, he had a secret and private purpose of his own, which made him rather nervous.

Miss Hamblin received him with less frigidity than before. In fact, the girl was so happy that she felt benevolent even to an emissary of her uncle.

On the previous visit her eyes had been heavy with tears, and her cheek pale from insulted pride. Now she felt herself once more her father's very daughter, the rightful heiress. A softer light glowed in her face, the light of sunshine; her cheek was rosy, her lips were smiling, her dark eyes were soft and limpid when she lifted them to greet her visitor.

Jack Baker thought he saw the light of welcome in those eyes, and took courage. He was more splendidly attired than

on his former visit. The season of early summer admitted the gorgeousness of white waistcoat, light dust-coat, scarlet tie, lavender gloves, white hat. His coarsely handsome face, marred by the tokens of indulgence, was not unpleasant. To be sure, Alison thought, comparing him mentally with her own lover, the man cannot help not being a gentleman: that is his misfortune, not his fault. But she thought he looked good-tempered, *d'un bon naturel*.

'I come again, Miss Hamblin,' said Jack, with the sunniest of smiles and an airy wave of his hand, 'as an ambassador from your uncle, who still, I need hardly tell you, deplores the contest in which he has become unavoidably engaged.'

'Really,' said Alison, 'I am surprised to learn it. To be sure, he can always retire from it.'

'I am here to make another proposal, or rather, to sound you as to your own views, if you will honour me by confiding them to me.' Jack dropped his voice, and tried to look insinuating.

The man, thought Alison, looks like a draper's assistant offering a shawl.

'Had you not better sit down and make the proposal in comfort, Mr. Baker?' she said, smiling. It was really pleasant to think of receiving proposals for a compromise when everything was settled and proved.

'Thank you, Miss Hamblin,' said Jack, taking a chair. It was more encouraging to be asked to sit down, but, somehow, he felt less at his ease. The room overpowered him: it was so full of flowers, dainty pictures, embroidery, and all the little things with which a young lady who need not consider cost loves to surround herself.

'Mr. Stephen Hamblin has never, I beg you to believe, been indifferent to your feelings in this matter,' Jack began. 'He has often lamented to me the hard position to which you might be reduced, if——'

'Thank you,' said Alison. 'Never mind my hard position. Let us come to the offer. Do not you think, however, that it would be best to make it in writing to my guardians?'

'No; certainly not. Mr. Hamblin would wish to deal with you direct,' said the ambassador. 'It is with his niece, not with his cousins, that he wishes to restore a good understanding.'

'Very well. Pray let me hear his proposal.'

'It is hardly a proposal; only a suggestion. What do you think of his withdrawing his claim, not because it is an unjust claim, but in your own interests, and out of consideration to yourself? In withdrawing it, he would naturally look to compensation.'

'Yes,' said Alison, smiling. 'Yes; I suppose, compensation for having set up an unjust claim.'

'One would say a half of the whole estate—something of that sort.'

'I see,' said Alison. 'I should have to give him half in order to get anything.'

'Quite so,' said Jack. 'Should you consider that proposal a liberal one?'

'What did I tell you when you came here last, Mr. Baker?' she asked quietly. 'Let me remind you. I said that I would hear nothing of any compromise until my father's name was vindicated. That must be my answer again. My uncle was the only man who dared to assail the memory of that most honourable and upright man. Nothing could make me surrender my right to defend it. I will have all, or nothing.'

'Is that your determination, Miss Hamblin?'

'It is, and I am sorry you have taken the trouble to come here on a fruitless errand.'

'My own trouble, Miss Hamblin,' said Jack, 'in your cause is nothing, absolutely nothing.'

'I think,' said Alison, 'that if my uncle had asked me in January last, as he had so little and I so much, to give him money, I should have given it. Now, however, the case is altered. I have been publicly branded in an open court; I go about the world with a stain upon my birth. I have been charged with having no right or title to my father's estate. Do not you see what a difference that makes?'

'But,' said Jack, 'think of the money. Think of the tremendous pile of money you are throwing away.'

'You cannot understand,' said Alison. 'You cannot, unfortunately, see that it has always been impossible for me to make any kind of compromise. If I said that three months ago, in my shame and despair, I must surely say it again and all the more, now that——'

She stopped suddenly.

'They *have* found something,' thought Jack.

'But will you credit him with good intentions?' he asked softly and sweetly.

'Certainly not,' said Alison, in a hard voice. 'Certainly not; his intentions have always, from the very first, been as bad as they could be. I wish never to see my uncle again, never to hear from him. However,' she rose, and her face changed with a smile, 'that is nothing to you, Mr. Baker. Our business is over, I think.'

Now here was his chance. It came and found him unprepared, because he had not expected that it would take this form. All the way down in the cab he had been thinking how he could best open the business. He had encouraged himself by little exhortations, such as, 'Go in and win, J. double-B. . . . Don't be

afraid,—she is but a woman. All women are alike. You're not so bad-looking, my boy, you've got a manner of your own with them; you've got the dibs; lots of girls would give their back-hair to get J double-B,' and so on, little epigrammatic sentences of encouragement thus delicately and feelingly put.

Now the time was come, and he hardly seemed equal to the occasion. Only a woman before him—all women are alike; yet Miss Hamblin, somehow, was not quite the same as Lotty, and Polly, and Topsy, who had, as previously stated, been called to the inner bar, and 'taken silk;' and it came upon him with rather a crushing force, that he had never seen any woman like Miss Hamblin before. But he was not without pluck, and he began to stammer, turning very red, and looking uncomfortable.

'I could hope, Miss Hamblin, that so far as I am personally concerned, the—the intimacy of myself and Mr Stephen Hamblin may be no bar to my—my—friendship with yourself.'

'Your friendship, Mr. Baker?' What *could* the man mean? 'Why, I was not aware that we were even acquaintances'

'I mean, that is,' said Jack, getting more hot in the nose. 'That when we meet in society, you will allow me——'

'It is not at all likely that we shall ever meet in society,' said Alison quickly. Then she thought she had said a rude thing, and added —'Because I go so little into any kind of society.'

'But if we were to meet, Miss Hamblin—and besides, I will try to meet you—people who have the will, you know.' Here he smiled, and looked so knowing, that Alison longed to box his ears. 'After church, say—I'm not much of a hand at church myself—but I could turn up when the sermon was over, you know.'

Alison began to grow indignant.

'I think I would rather not meet you "when the sermon is over,"' she said quietly

'If you would let me call upon you,' Jack went on, thinking he was progressing famously. 'I should like it best. We could talk here, you know, or in the gardens and conservatories. I dare say you are pretty dull in this great house all by yourself. I could cheer you up, perhaps. Let me try, Miss Hamblin'

'Cheer her up?' she looked in amazement.

'I'm not a bad sort,' he continued, warming to his work. 'Come to know me, I am rather a good sort; at least they tell me so.' He assumed a smile of satisfaction which made her shudder. 'I may have my faults like most men. To begin with, I am not come, like you, of a great City House. I had my own business to make, and I've made it. The dibs are all of my own piling'—he thought this might sound vulgar—'and when I say "dibs," of course I mean the money, because I began as nothing

but a clerk. You wouldn't think that, Miss Hamblin, would you, to look at me now? However, here I am—just as you see me. I've got a big business in tea; really, a big business. There's my cab at the door for you to see the kind of hack I can afford—cheap at a hundred; and I'm quite a young man still, Miss Hamblin, and perhaps not so bad looking as some—eh? Handsome Jack I have been called. We should run well together; and the long and the short is that, if you will let me pay my attentions to you, I am ready, money or no money.'

Alison burst out laughing. She was so happy in her mind that she was amused rather than offended. The man's vulgarity, his impudence, his mock humility, his personal conceit, his intense belief in himself, amused her. She clapped her hands together as delighted as any schoolgirl at a joke, and burst into merry peals of laughter, which utterly routed and discomfited the wooer.

'Pay your attentions to me, Mr. Baker?' she cried; 'oh, I am so sorry, because I am obliged to decline that delicate offer, so delicately made. Another girl, Mr. Baker, must have the happiness of receiving your attentions. And oh! I really feel what I am giving up: the big business in tea, and the cheap hack, and the—the dibs, and the young man, still young, called Handsome Jack. But there are many other girls, I am sure, who take a deep interest in tea, and expensive hacks, and dibs, and Handsome Jacks. You will have better luck with them, no doubt. Good-morning, Mr. Bunter Baker.'

She laughed in his face, and left him there standing, hot and flushed. His knees felt shaky, and monosyllables trembled on his lips.

He wiped his forehead, and asked himself if she meant it. For really, this derisive way of receiving his suit had not presented itself to his mind as a possibility. She might refuse him, he thought; that was possible, but not probable, considering his big business, and his—well, his handsome person—why not acknowledge the truth? Often persons of the opposite sex called him Handsome Jack—all women are alike—why not Miss Hamblin?

Hang it! was there anything ridiculous in him? Couldn't the girl say 'no' without laughing in his face? Perhaps, after all, she was only egging him on. How if he were to try the very next Sunday morning and hang about the doors of the church when the congregation were coming out?

She was gone; the door stood open. As he gathered up his hat and gloves he became aware that in the doorway stood a boy, with white hair and pink cheeks, who appeared to be enjoying some excellent joke. That is, he was laughing from ear to ear when Jack turned round, and on being observed, he

pulled out a pocket-handkerchief, and went through a pantomime of sorrow, which inspired Mr. J. Bunter Baker with a strong desire of horsewhipping that boy. Had he been listening?

'Oh! oh! oh!' cried the pink boy, retreating warily in the direction of the pantry. 'Oh! oh! what a dreadful thing! She won't have him; she throws away his dibs and despises his tea: our full-flavoured at two and-four, and our really choice at three and two. She won't have him, even though they call him Handsome Jack. Ho! ho! Handsome Jack!'

Mr. Baker rushed at the boy. Young Nick threw himself into the pantry and locked the door. He heard his baffled enemy immediately afterwards retreating, and opening the door, began a prolonged and most unearthly yell as of agony, at which Mr. Baker fled hurriedly, and all the household rushed to see what was the matter, headed by Mrs. Cridland.

'It's all right, old lady,' said her son, tranquilly; 'he's gone, I perceive.'

'Who?' asked his mother.

'Handsome Jack. Oh, Alison!' he went on, 'what a pity! You've thrown him away! He's gone for good.

> '"Let others wed for rings, and things, and pearls,
> 'Tis oh! a Writing-master's wife to be—ee—ee— ee."'

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOW STEPHEN STILL HAD DREAMS.

A LITTLE cloud in the sky, no bigger than a man's hand. Stephen saw it in the heavens when Jack Baker quoted Alderney Codd's words. If Jack, who never looked skywards, had seen it, it would have spread over the whole horizon, and obscured the sun long before he returned from his embassy. He sought his friend immediately.

'It is all up,' he reported; 'I am certain they have found out everything.'

'What have they found out?' asked Stephen.

'I don't know. She didn't tell me. But I am certain——'

'Hang it, man! be reasonable,' Stephen said. 'What makes you certain?'

'Look here, Hamblin. I find the young lady happy, radiant, not cast down at all. She is all smiles and happiness; she isn't the least afraid of you. When I suggested a companion, she

first laughed and then she smiled. You know their cunning way when they have got a secret all to themselves and like to hug it; and then she became grave, and tried to work herself into a rage, but couldn't see her way, even though she talked about you. But what she said afterwards was more important still.'

'What was that?'

'"Tell my uncle," she said, "that if I refused any compromise three months ago, when I was in doubt and despair, ten times as much would I refuse to make any now, when——" And then she broke off short. Make what you like out of that, Hamblin. To me it means fighting, with plenty of evidence in the background. And I wish I saw my way clear to that thou.—that I fooled away on your representations.'

'Come, Jack,' said Stephen, trying to make a show of confidence which he did not feel—'come, don't be alarmed about your little venture. It's as safe as the Bank; I tell you for the hundredth time that they *cannot* have found anything, because there is nothing to find. My brother *never married*. Let them do their worst. And as for the money, it doesn't matter to you how long you wait.'

'Doesn't it?' said Jack. 'I can tell you then that's nonsense. Why, there's scarcely a House in London that can let an outstanding thousand go like that. Hang it! it takes long enough to make. And one never knows what may happen. I've got the biggest thing on at the present moment—but never mind that.'

So the great speculator in tea had his personal anxieties, a revelation which brought some comfort to Stephen's soul.

'Another thing,' Jack went on, smoothing his moustache and speaking with a little hesitation, 'you may attach no importance to it, but I do. When a girl who is going to be a pauper gets an offer of marriage from a man—well, a man like myself—she don't as a rule burst out laughing in his face.'

'Was that what happened to you, Jack?' Stephen asked, smiling.

'Yes, it was. I don't mind, to you, owning that it was. She laughed in my face. Yet I actually proposed to her, although she may not have a penny. What do you think of that, Hamblin?'

'Think of your proposal? Why, I suppose it was on the same principle as that on which you lent me the thousand pounds. You thought there was money behind—eh? From me or my niece, one or the other, you would stand to win.'

'Very likely,' said Jack; 'but why did she laugh? that's what I want to know. I'm not a man accustomed to be laughed at.

What is there ridiculous about me? Isn't a Bunter Baker as good as a Hamblin?'

'Can't say, I'm sure,' replied Stephen. 'If you attach any importance to the whims and fancies of a girl like that, you had better ask her for a reason. So she wouldn't have you. Ah! you see, my boy, it is very well to talk about a girl going to be a pauper; but Alison isn't a pauper yet, and she doesn't quite understand what poverty means. Go and ask her this time next year.'

'You think you will have the estate, then?'

'I am sure I shall. And I need not tell you, Jack Baker, that unless that little——'

'Stop!' cried Jack; 'I tell you again that I won't have that magnificent creature—who ought to be on the boards, by Gad! in black velvet, and she'd outshine the lot—called a little devil.'

'Very good,' said Stephen, 'call her what you like. What I mean is, that unless she submits and eats humble pie, she shall not have one brass farthing out of me, whether you marry her or whether you do not.'

Stephen, alternating between fits of despondency and elation, was now in the latter stage. He was confident, he was ready to mete out punishment or reward to his enemies or friends, as they deserved it.

Jack Baker went away to the City. Stephen continued in this hot fit of confidence. No harm could come to him; his case was strong and sound; yet a little while, and the enemy would give in. Everybody knows the state of mind which, as superstitious folk hold, precedes some great calamity. The victim is foolishly, childishly, recklessly confident and happy; he disregards those warnings which used to play so large a part in the lives of our ancestors: magpies, black cats, crows, hares, run across his path unheeded; screech-owls hoot and he hears them not; brindled cats mew and he only laughs; knives are crossed, salt is spilled, dreams are told before breakfast, and he recks not; the visions of the night have brought him squalling babies, and he forgets them; he stumbles at the threshold and thinks nothing of it; the day is Friday, the thirteenth, and he regards it not; every kind of miraculous warning is lavished upon that man, and he goes on to his doom, laughing and careless. Stephen was that reckless man: his dream had but one more day to run, and, as if anxious to make the most of it, he revelled, and lolled, and hugged himself in the contemplation and imagination of his coming wealth.

'They have been searching, advertising, running here and there for six months,' he said to himself; 'nothing has come of it, because there has been nothing to come. Why, I *know* that Anthony was never married. As for Alison's mother, they

must find one for her, and I dare say they will. And as Anthony was never in Scotland, I am not afraid of any attempt being made to prove a marriage. Old Billiter hates me, but then old Billiter is not a common rogue. That is very certain.'

It was a fine afternoon in June. From his chambers in Pall Mall he looked up and down that street, and rejoiced in the sight of the rich, who enjoyed, though they hardly appeared to enjoy, the wealth which was about to be his.

'They were born to it,' he murmured, sitting in an easy-chair at the open window, and watching the *jeunesse dorée*, as, splendid in raiment, knightly in bearing, they went up and down the steps of the clubs, or sauntered along the pavement; 'they were born to it; they never knew anything else, I suppose. Why the devil do they look so melancholy? They should have been hungry after unattainable pleasures, like me, to know what money can bring, what it is worth, even at five-and-forty. They should have been sons of a methodical and frugal London merchant, who would keep them to a starvation allowance of pocket-money, would look on every little outburst as a mortal sin, would inculcate the most rigid views of religion, and then leave almost everything to an elder brother, who didn't know how to spend, and hadn't a spirit above his indigo bags. Then they would look more contented than they do now.

'I had some spending out of those few thousands: they lasted a couple of years, I think, if I remember right. Then came my mother's little fortune, all her savings; not much, but something to give a man another little fling. There was no occasion to save it, because Anthony himself told me he had promised my mother never to give me up. Why, it would have been unchristian not to have accepted that most sacred trust. I did accept it. I said to myself: "Stephen, old boy, you are your brother's charge; you are the desolate orphan for whom he has pledged himself to find the comforts and the luxuries as well as the necessaries of life." And I must say that Anthony behaved like a trump in every way except one—he had no business to bring that girl home.

'She's done all the mischief. If it had not been for her, I should have stepped without a question into the property. And her impudence! no compromise, if you please. Why, I only meant to bring her to an offer, and then to throw it back in her face. Sorry she refused Jack Baker, though. That young man thinks I am likely to let her have half, does he? Ho! ho! what a sell for him when he had got her, when it was too late, when he had found out her temper, and when he really knew that she wasn't going to have a penny. You, Miss Alison Hamblin, or whatever you may choose to call yourself, may go to the devil. As for making you an allowance, I'd rather chuck

the money into the Thames. I shall have her here on her knees before long.

'The partners, too: I wonder how much of Anthony's money was locked up in the House. Sure to be a very large sum. Well, I shall get them here on *their* knees too. And then I shall withdraw it all, and smash the House. What do I care for the House? I've got the money, and I'm going to spend it. Time that the Hamblins left off saving.

'There is Alderney Codd, what shall I do with him? Let him go on his knees, too, and I will see. He is a useful sort of man, one of those who go up and down and talk; I think I shall forgive Alderney, and lend him money occasionally. A man is better for a jackal or two to run about at his bidding.'

Then he closed his eyes, and went off into a vision of impossible joys which the money was to purchase him. They were chiefly the joys which come from watching other people's envy and admiration, because, as a matter of fact, Stephen had all his life enjoyed almost everything that a rich man can command. One thing, however, was wanting: he could not boast of possession. He was always dependent.

Well, that was over now; he was free: he was rich, or was going to be in a very little while: he was going to step before the world as the undoubted possessor of a princely fortune.

He was roused from his reverie by a modest knock at his door.

It was, to his amazement, no other than Alderney Codd himself, who had abstained from calling since the day of his joining the side of the enemy.

'You, Alderney!'

'Yes, Stephen,' replied Alderney, meekly. 'May I come in?'

'Come in, man, come in,' said Stephen. 'Why, your new friends seem to treat you better than your old ones. When you and I went about together, you never could afford such coats and hats. How do you do it, Alderney?'

Stephen spoke quite pleasantly. This encouraged Alderney.

'I have been engaged in regular work,' he said, 'for the partners in the House.'

'He speaks as if there was only one House in the world.'

'There is but one for me,' replied Alderney, simply. 'I have been engaged in making researches in parish-registers.'

'And what have you found?'

'Nothing,' said Alderney.

'Of course you have not found anything. And you never will. Are you going to give up a wild-goose chase and come back to your old friends? I forgive you, old boy, and you may return whenever you like.'

'Thank you, Stephen,' said Alderney, with great humility;

'that is very good of you. And I always said you had a good heart. I have found nothing. And I fear I cannot much longer venture to draw upon the House for time spent in reading registers. But if I have found nothing, Gilbert Yorke has.'

Stephen started and turned pale, for Alderney looked round the room and whispered these words.

'What do you mean, Alderney?'

'I do not know They haven't told me yet. They will tell me, of course, presently; but I know nothing except that Alison is happy, and that Gilbert Yorke has written letters which have put your cousins Augustus and William in excellent spirits.'

'What have they found?'

'I tell you I do not know. One thing only I heard. The last words which Augustus said to his partner were these: "So then, after all, Alison need not blush for her mother." This morning another letter came from him, the purport of which I do not know. And he has now arrived at the office and is closeted with the chiefs.'

Stephen sprang to his feet.

'"So, then, Alison need not blush for her mother?" That was what you heard. "Need not blush?" What construction do you put upon those words, Alderney?'

'What can be put? Stephen, for the sake of old times, give in. There is yet time. No one knows that I have called here; no one will ever suspect that I heard those words, or that I came here to warn you. There is time; sit down. For heaven's sake, don't stare at me in that way. Sit down, and write to Augustus. Withdraw your claim: say that you are sorry, say that you will not stand between Alison and her father's fortune. Stephen, if you do this, all may yet be well.'

Stephen's lips were parched, and his throat dry.

'Don't chatter, Alderney,' he said. 'Let me think. "She need not——" Why, it may mean anything. You have no reason for believing it to bear the construction that you want me to put upon it.'

'No. Yet I am certain, from the satisfaction of both, that the words do bear that construction.'

Stephen laughed; yet his laughter had no mirth in it.

'You are not a bad fellow, Alderney, though you have gone over to the wrong side. But you are not, in this instance, particularly wise. You believe, I dare say, that there is something found out at last.'

'I am sure of it.'

'And you come to warn us. Very good. I am obliged to

you, Alderney; but I shall remain as I am. No surrender: my whole claim or nothing.'

'Then, Stephen,' said Alderney, sighing, 'it will be nothing.'

'That is my look-out.'

'Stephen, think how the whole matter may be amicably arranged before it is too late. You have made your cousins, your niece, the whole family, your enemies. When they triumph, you will have no mercy shown you. Out of your brother's estate you will have nothing. I do not know the extent of your own fortune, but I do know that it is very heavily dipped, and I doubt whether you can live as you have been accustomed to live upon your private resources.'

'That too, Alderney, is my look-out.'

'Another thing,' persisted Alderney, 'your brother Anthony intended—there can be no doubt whatever that he intended to leave the bulk of his estate to his daughter; you cannot deny that.'

'On the contrary, I do not know what my brother's intentions were. He never confided them to me.'

'He was so good a fellow, Stephen, that you ought to respect his wishes. What do you honestly think he meant to do?'

'I believe that he proposed leaving me, not Alison, the fortune which should be mine by law, and making an adequate provision for his daughter. Acting on this belief, I have twice sent an ambassador to Alison, offering a compromise. Twice my message has been received with scorn, and my messenger insulted.'

'Then I can say no more,' said Alderney. 'As we say with the Classic, "Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat." Your brain is turned, Stephen.'

'Come, Alderney, I will not discuss the thing with you any more. It is absurd; I shall not surrender anything; and I will bring that girl to submission before I have done.'

'You will not do that, Stephen, if I know Alison Hamblin. She is as determined as yourself.'

'We shall try,' said Stephen, smiling unpleasantly.

Alderney withdrew. He had done his best, and things must take their own course. But he was troubled. There would now be no such pleasant family reconciliation as he had looked forward to.

He returned to the City, and sought his cousin Augustus.

'Tell me,' he said, 'if you have found anything.'

Augustus got up, and shut the door carefully.

'Alderney,' he said, 'I thought this morning that we had got out of the mess. I find now, after an interview with Gilbert Yorke, that we have only got into one.'

'A mess!—what kind of a mess?'

'I wish we had never looked into the thing at all. I almost wish we had let Stephen have the estate and do what he liked with it.'

'But what is it?'

'I cannot tell you till to-morrow. I can only say that the greatest surprise, the greatest consternation, has fallen upon us.'

'But I overheard you this morning saying that Alison need not blush for her mother.'

'I did say so. That was in consequence of a letter from Gilbert. Her mother's marriage is clearly established.'

'Then I do not understand.'

'Never mind now, Alderney,' said Augustus; 'we have to consider what is best to be done. You had better leave us now. Say nothing, guess nothing. Come here if you like to-morrow at twelve—we have invited Stephen to confer with us at that time—then you will learn all.'

He quietly pushed Alderney out of the room, and returned to his desk, where he sat with his paper before him, puzzled and bewildered.

Presently his partner, William the Silent, came into the room, and sat on the other side of the table. Both shook their heads without speaking.

'Augustus,' said William.

'William,' said Augustus.

Both shook their heads again, and then William got up and went out again as silently as he had entered.

Stephen's golden dream was disturbed; tranquillity, which is a necessary for golden dreams, had deserted him. He left his chambers and wandered to his club; he tried to play billiards, but his hand shook. Three old fogies who played whist every afternoon asked him to take a hand; he did; he revoked, and saw no Blue-Peters, and trumped his partner's trick, and forgot the cards, and committed every atrocity that a whist-player can commit: he broke the whole code of Cavendish. After seeing a double bumper fooled away, his partner rose in silent dignity, and left the house.

Then Stephen tried to read the papers, and found no interest in any. He wandered about the streets, torn by a doubt whether he had better not even now agree with his adversary quickly.

At dinner-time he expected Jack Baker, but that worthy did not appear. He dined alone: he sat in the smoking-room with a magazine before him, which he did not read, thinking over what might happen, and taking a gloomy view of things which even the claret had not been able to remove. At nine he went home to his chambers.

Two letters were on his table. The first was from Jack Baker.

'My dear Hamblin,' he said.

'Send me over at once as much as you can spare of the thousand pounds I lent you; or raise money somehow, and let me have it all. I suppose you have heard what has happened? There has not been so sudden a fall in prices in the memory of man. I am hit, but I shall weather the storm somehow, I dare say. Let me have the money to-morrow.

'Yours ever,

'J. B. B.'

'He's smashed,' said Stephen, putting down the letter; 'smash is the meaning of that letter. Well, he has had his day. As for the rest of the thousand, I had better stick to it.'

He opened the other letter. It was from his cousin, Augustus Hamblin.

'My dear Cousin,' (Stephen laughed),

'We shall be glad if you will call upon us in Great St. Simon Apostle, at twelve o'clock to-morrow morning. We have a *most* important communication to make to you: a discovery which we have only this morning learned.

'Yours sincerely,

'Augustus Anthony Hamblin.'

Stephen put the letter down, and began to think what it might mean. Presently he extinguished the light and sat beside the window. The prospect was gloomy now, indeed. An important discovery; what could this mean? The ground was slipping away from under his feet. As he had been confident in the morning, so he was despairing now. He saw before him a vagabond and poverty-stricken old man, subsisting on the alms of his cousins, wandering from place to place, hungering after the enjoyments which he could not afford, sinking lower and lower, becoming daily more and more pinched, more wretched, more dependent. A miserable outlook: a wretched dream.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW STEPHEN HEARD THE NEWS.

'I had almost forgotten Mr. Bragge,' said Augustus, opening one of his letters the next morning.

This was a note from the private detective, stating that the

last clue which promised remarkably well had terminated with no useful result; in fact, it ended with a labouring man who was suffering from delirium tremens. He regretted that his research had turned out so badly; but, he added, another clue had been discovered, the nature of which he would for the moment keep secret. He proposed to follow this up vigorously; he had no doubt that it would lead to a complete solution of the case. Meanwhile, he enclosed an account of his expenditure up to date, and would be obliged if Mr. Hamblin would send him another cheque for twenty pounds on account.

It was a dreadful blow for Mr. Theodore Bragge when he received a settlement in full of his account, with the information that the case was now closed, and his services would be no more required. He had long made up his mind that there was nothing to find out, and that he might go on for the rest of his natural life, following up clues with a large salary at a percentage, so to speak, on his expenditure. Meat and drink—especially drink—the case had been to him. He will never, he owns with tears, again find employers so generous as the firm of Anthony Hamblin and Co.

The day was Wednesday, which was young Nick's half-holiday.

He resolved to spend it with the writing-master, but thought he would drop in at the office first. In fact, after taking a turn round Lower Thames Street, Idol Lane, Eastcheap, Rood Lane, and a few other places dear to a boy of imagination, where the stream of Pactolus runs with the deepest, strongest, and yellowest current, he found himself in the square of Great St. Simon Apostle, about half-past two in the afternoon. He exchanged a few compliments in whispers with the junior clerks, and then mounted the broad stairs, and began to ramble idly about the passages. He passed with reverence the doors of Mr. Augustus and Mr. William Hamblin, the partners, and presently stood before that on which was still to be read the name of Mr. Anthony Hamblin. He shook his head gravely at sight of this. Then his eyes lit up, and his white eyebrows lifted, and his pink face shone with mirth and mischief, and he laughed in silence, shaking all over in enjoyment of the imaginary situation.

'If they knew,' he murmured; 'if they only knew!'

Then he turned the handle softly, and looked into the room.

No one was there: the room had not been used since the death of its owner: the familiar furniture was there, the old-fashioned, heavy, oaken table, without cover, which had probably been built for the very first Anthony, remained in its old place, with the wooden chair in which the last Anthony had been wont to sit, and the blotting-pad which he had used, before it. In one

corner stood a low screen of ancient workmanship, also a family heirloom. There were portraits of successive Anthonys on the wainscoted walls, and there was a cabinet in massive mahogany, with glass doors; but the contents of the cabinet were kept secret by means of curtains which had once been green.

In spite of the boy's possession of so great a secret, he felt a ghostly feeling creep on him as he softly closed the door behind him, and entered the room on tiptoe. He shuddered, as one shudders when reminded of a dead man. Then he recovered himself again, and began curiously to examine the room and its contents. First he opened the drawers: in the one immediately before the chair was a novel—'Ho! ho! that was the way in which Uncle Anthony spent his time in the City, was it?'—in the other two he found a heterogeneous mass of things—cigar-cases, portraits of Alison, memorandum-books, letters, *menus* of dinners, cards of invitation to civic banquets, and so forth; things which the boy turned over with interest. Then he thought that he would at last discover the contents of the mysterious cabinet. He opened it: three of the shelves contained Indian curios, covered with dust: they had been brought home on one of the earlier voyages by the first Anthony, and had never left the office. But on one shelf stood a decanter, still half filled with sherry, and a box of biscuits.

When there was nothing more to see, the boy solemnly seated himself in Anthony's chair, and, after a silent but enjoyable laugh, proceeded to meditate.

His reflections turned naturally upon the importance of the secret which he carried about with him, and of the grandeur which would be his whenever he chose to disclose it. Grandeur unheard of, grandeur never before achieved by mortal boy: the part, indeed, played in history by boys, save and except the drummer boy, the call boy, and the printer's devil, has always been ludicrously out of proportion to the number of boys existing at any period. Grandeur? Why it would be spread all over the House how he, Nicolas Cridland, had not only discovered the secret, alone and unaided, but also kept it until the right time came. When would that time come? Surely, soon. Would Uncle Anthony resolve upon continuing his disguise as a teacher of writing while he, Nicolas, was received as a clerk in the House? while he rose gradually higher and higher, even in the distant days when he should be received as a partner? Surely the day must some time come when he should be able to stand proudly before the partners, Augustus and William, and lay his hand upon his heart and say: 'Anthony Hamblin is not dead, but living. I alone have known it all along.' Then Mr. Augustus would get up from that chair in which the boy was sitting—he rose from the chair himself, and

acted it in dumb show—and say: 'Young Nick—no, Nicolas Cridland, whom we are proud to call cousin—you have shown yourself so worthy of confidence, that we instantly appoint you principal buyer and manager at the dock sales, for the firm. You will attend the next sale on Thursday afternoon, with the samples in your pocket.'

The boy had got through this speech—always in dumb show—and was thinking how to reply with a compliment at once to the sagacity of the firm in selecting him for such responsible business, and to his own extraordinary discretion, prudence, and secrecy, when he heard steps outside. The room was at the end of a long passage, so that the persons to whom the feet belonged were clearly proposing to visit the room. The vision of greatness instantly vanished, and the boy rushed for shelter behind the screen. It was a low screen, about five feet three high, quite incapable of hiding Lady Teazle, had she been of the average height of English women, but high enough to shelter the boy, who, indeed, sat upon the floor with his hat off, and looked through the chinks where the screen folded.

The party which entered the room consisted of the two partners, Mr. Billiter, and Gilbert Yorke. To the boy's terror, the old lawyer, after looking about for a place to set down his hat, placed it on an angle of the screen. Fortunately he did not look over. Then they all sat down, Augustus Hamblin at the head of the table. Gilbert Yorke placed before the chairman a bundle of papers. Everybody looked at his watch, and all wore an air of grave importance.

'Lord,' said the boy to himself, 'now, if I were only to jump up like Jack-in-the box, and tell them who was teaching what, where he was teaching it, and for how much, and who was getting his boots downer at the heel every day, how they would stare! I've half a mind to do it, too.'

But he did not, because just then his interest in the situation grew more absorbing; for the party was completed by the arrival of none other than Stephen Hamblin himself.

He arrived in the midst of an observation which was being made by Mr. Billiter, as if following up a conversation.

'Life,' he said, 'is a succession of blunders, chiefly committed through laziness, and a foolish desire to avoid present trouble. Come in, Stephen, and sit down. I was saying that most crimes are the result of laziness. You are going to be told of a most amazing blunder which has led us all astray.'

'He looks mighty black,' young Nick murmured, gazing intently through the chink; 'almost as black as when he was turned out of the house. Lord! if *he* knew. *Shall* I jump up and tell them all? I would if I thought that Anthony wouldn't go mad.'

'I am here,' said Stephen, who did indeed look black, 'without my solicitor. The course is unusual, but the interview must be considered privileged. One thing, however, before we begin, if Mr. Billiter is going to revive old stories in his usual pleasant manner, I shall go away at once.'

'I have nothing to say at this interview,' said the lawyer; 'at least, I think I have nothing to say.'

'The communication we have to make to you, Stephen,' said Augustus, 'is of so grave a nature, so important, and so unexpected, that we have invited Anthony's solicitor, your father's solicitor, to be present. You will acknowledge that we were right?'

'Important and unexpected? Then you have, I suppose, found out that Anthony was never married?'

These were brave words, but Stephen was evidently ill at ease. In fact he had passed an uneasy time. Alderney Codd's warning, which he had met with bravado, came back to him in the dark hours. And after a sleepless night he kept his appointment with shaken nerves.

'We have decided,' Augustus continued, 'on at once telling you everything.'

'That is so far candid. Probably you have concluded between you that it will be to your advantage to tell me everything?'

'You shall judge of that yourself, Cousin Stephen.' Augustus was very grave, and spoke slowly. 'We have known you all your life. It was in this room that you received dismissal from the House in which you might even have become a partner.'

He spoke as if no higher honour, no greater earthly happiness, could befall any man than to become a partner in the House of Anthony Hamblin and Company.

The boy, looking through the chink of the screen, shook his head solemnly.

'D—— the partnership, and the House too!' said Stephen. 'I told you that I would not listen to the revival of old stories. If that is all that you have to say——'

He rose and seized his hat.

'It is not all; pray sit down again. We have to go back twenty years. Carry your memory back for that time. Where are you?'

'I am waiting to hear,' said Stephen, sullenly.

Then Augustus told Stephen the same story which Miss Nethersole had told Anthony; almost, too, in the same words. He told how two men had visited a little town when on a fishing excursion, how one of them eloped with a girl of eighteen, named Dora Nethersole, and how she had died deserted and neglected at Bournemouth.

Stephen listened with unmoved countenance.

'This is the sort of information,' he said, 'which one gets from advertising, and church registers, and that sort of thing. How does it bear upon the case?'

'You shall hear immediately, Stephen. The man who eloped with the girl, who was married to her at Hungerford, who lived with her at Lulworth, and who deserted her there, leaving her to starve and die of neglect and sorrow, was not—Anthony at all. It was no other than yourself, Stephen.'

'I allow you to put the case your own way,' said Stephen, 'because I am anxious for you to get to the point, if any, which bears upon present business.'

'It was you, and not Anthony, who deserted Dora Hamblin; it was Anthony, and not you, who soothed her last moments, and consoled her in the hour of death. Here is a copy of her last journal, which you may take away and meditate upon.'

'I know all about her death,' said Stephen, callously; 'Anthony told me of that. It is an old, old story: twenty years old, and forgotten. What has it to do with the business in hand, and the claims of that girl?'

'Everything; because you have been quite right all along—Anthony was never married——'

'Ah!' said Stephen, a sudden flush of joy and relief crossing his face.

'Was never married at all, and he left no will.'

'Then I *am* the heir of all.'

He raised himself upright, and looked round with an air of mastership.

'You are the heir of all,' repeated Augustus, solemnly.

'Good. I give you notice that I will do nothing for the girl—nothing at all.'

'Stop,' said Augustus; 'more remains to be told. When Anthony wrote to you that your wife was dead, he did not inform you of what he thought you unworthy to know—that she left a child.'

'A child!'

'A girl. She became Anthony's care. He brought her up to consider herself his daughter. Alison Hamblin is the daughter of you, Stephen, and of Dora, your wife.'

'My gum!' This was the whispered utterance of the boy behind the screen.

Stephen's face became darker still. He gazed with hard eyes at the speaker.

'My daughter!' he said slowly. 'Alison is my daughter? Have you proof of this?'

'We have—we have ample proof.'

'Mind, I will not accept her as my daughter without it. I

want no daughter. I shall require the most exact corroboration of this extraordinary statement.'

'You shall have it,' said Augustus.

'You are not worthy——' cried Gilbert, springing to his feet at the same moment.

'Sit down, young man,' said Mr. Billiter; 'there is more to say.'

'There is something very much more serious to say,' continued Augustus Hamblin. 'Remember, Stephen, that Miss Nethersole, in answering your wife's letter, offered her an allowance of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, payable on the first day of every year. How often did you draw that money?'

Stephen started.

'How often? till she died.'

'We have here,' he went on very slowly, 'copies—they are copies only, and you can have them to look at if you please—of eight receipts, all drawn by you. Two of them are signed by your wife: six of them are forgeries—by yourself.'

'It's a lie!' shouted Stephen, bringing his fist down upon the table.

'You did not, then, receive the money?'

'Certainly not.'

'Unfortunately,' said Augustus, 'the clerk who honoured the draft every year knows you by sight, and is ready to swear to you: the experts who have examined the signatures swear that they are all in your writing: the lady who suffered the loss of the money is ready to prosecute criminally. You will be charged with the crime: you will be tried for the crime. You now know why I reminded you, at the outset, of the cause of your dismissal from the House.'

Stephen said nothing. He looked round him stupidly. This was a blow, indeed, which he did not expect.

'We have anxiously considered whether we should communicate these things to Alison, your daughter. We would willingly have spared her all knowledge of them; but, out of respect for the memory of the man whom she will always regard as her father, we must tell her that it was not he who killed his young wife by neglect and ill-treatment. We shall have to let her know that it was the man who was always called her uncle who did this thing. As regards the forgeries, we think we have a simple means of keeping the matter in the background altogether.'

'What is that?' asked Stephen, eagerly.

'It is this: Go away at once. Execute a deed of gift in favour of your daughter. Never return to England, and draw upon us for any reasonable amount of annuity.'

Stephen was so dismayed by the prospect as presented by his

cousin, that he made as if he would accede to these terms. His face was not pretty to look at.

'If I do not accede?' he asked.

'Then Miss Nethersole will find out—she must be told—who it was that robbed her of so much money: and she is a hard woman. It seems to me, Stephen, that the choice is one which does not admit of much consideration. Fourteen years in a convict's prison is not to any man's taste; you would get small enjoyment out of your wealth, if it were to be purchased at such a price. Disgrace and shame are before you on the one hand: on the other, safety and silence. If you care to think of such a thing in addition, you may consider that your daughter, who would otherwise know nothing of this episode in your career, would begin her new relationship with the horror of such a crime, and the disgrace of such a conviction.'

'My daughter,' murmured the unhappy man. 'Yes, I had forgotten; that is, I had not thought about my daughter.'

'It is in your daughter's interests that we have told you the whole truth. Otherwise we might have been tempted to let things take their own course, in which case you would probably have been arrested in a few days, without receiving the slightest warning.'

'I should, however,' said Mr. Billiter, sweetly, 'suggest Spain. It is a country which, under all circumstances, is likely to prove attractive to you for a long time.'

Stephen grunted a response.

'All this,' murmured young Nick, behind the screen, 'is real jam—blackberry jam. I wouldn't have missed this for pounds. Wonder if they will find me out? Wonder if I'm going to sneeze?'

He held his nose tight to prevent such a fatal accident, and listened and peeped harder than ever.

'Mr. Augustus,' he said, 'has got him in a cleft stick. My! if he isn't the miserablest of sinners. Some sense in going to church if you are such a sinner as Uncle Stephen. Looks it too, all over; every inch a sinner.'

'It is absurd,' said Stephen, 'to deny a thing which you declare you can prove. If the thing demanded it, if it were necessary, the charge would be met with a complete answer.'

'But it is not necessary,' said Mr. Billiter.

'As it is,' said Stephen, trying to smile, 'all I have to say is that—you have won. I retire. I am ready to renounce, in the interests of my daughter—if she is my daughter—the—the—bulk of this fortune to which I am now the undoubted heir. When can the papers be signed?'

'You can come to my office to-morrow morning,' said Mr. Billiter, cheerfully; 'I will promise to make no allusions to

the past, and you can draw a cheque in advance to meet and pay any outstanding liabilities before you go abroad.'

'As I am going abroad,' said Stephen, with a simplicity which did him great credit, 'it would be quite absurd to pay any of my debts.'

He put on his hat and walked out of the room: his shoulders were bent, and though he tried to walk with his old swagger, he had something of the appearance of the whipped hound. This is inevitable under such disagreeable circumstances.

The other four, left alone, congratulated each other on the success of their diplomacy.

Then they broke up and went away. Mr. Billiter took up his hat without looking over the screen, and the boy was left alone.

He remained there, not daring to move, for five minutes; then he slowly got up, and danced a little double-shuffle round the chair in which Stephen had sat.

'I'm the luckiest boy in all the world!' he cried, though his face was pale at the sudden shock of this discovery. 'I know all their little secrets all round. But oh!'—he stopped dancing, and became very grave—'what an awful example, to a future partner in the house, is the history of Stephen Hamblin! If he wasn't Alison's father—and there's another start of the very rummiest—if he wasn't Alison's father, and so it had to be kept dark. I would write that history out fair for use in schools. It should be set to music—I mean, to Latin exercises—and it would be a great deal more useful than the doings of the impostor Balbus. "The Wicked Hamblin," it should be headed. Ahab and Ahaziah—both of them—were saints with rings round their heads, compared to Uncle Stephen. And even——' he hesitated for another historical example—'even Jehoram was an angel of light.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW STEPHEN DEFIED THEM ALL.

STEPHEN HAMBLIN went home to his chambers. The time was four o'clock. He bore with him the manuscript which his cousin had given him. His step was weary, and the lines in his dark face were heavily marked.

There was a note lying on his table: it was a second letter from Jack Baker, urging immediate repayment of the money.

Stephen threw it aside impatiently: Baker's troubles mattered little to him: he had other things to think of.

He sat down presently, and tried to think.

He could not arrange his thoughts. He could not put things together in anything like sequence. They had discovered what he thought could never be found out—the forgeries of the receipts: they had found, too, what he never suspected or dreamed of—the existence of a daughter. Anthony told him that his wife was dead. Anthony told him with cold voice, but without a word of reproof, that his wife was buried in the cemetery of Bournemouth. Anthony had not told him, nor had he suspected, that there was a child.

Why had Dora kept that secret from him? Why had Anthony kept that secret? He laughed aloud as he recalled a thing long since forgotten—how Anthony had gone, himself, and spoken to Rachel Nethersole about her sister, while he and Dora were actually plotting and planning for their secret marriage at Hungerford. No doubt Anthony was in love, and remained in love long after he, Stephen, had come out of it; no doubt he kept this child as a sort of souvenir of that dead and hopeless passion. Poor old Anthony! he always was a soft-hearted sort of man: little better than a fool when it came to the commoner emotions of humanity. Why, he himself could always get round Anthony.

A daughter.

Alison Hamblin, the girl whom he had been accustomed to hate, to plot against, and to curse, was his daughter; that was a very surprising circumstance. For his own part, he had never felt in the slightest degree a paternal instinct towards her—quite the contrary. He had always regarded her with sentiments of extreme dislike; he hated her like sin, he said, untruthfully, because he was not one of those who hate sin. She came between himself and a possible succession. How could he avoid hating her? Even now, when he was told with one breath that she was his daughter, he was ordered with the other to resign his rights in her favour, or else——

That was it—or else—— He turned this alternative over and over in his mind. That, at least, was clear enough. The documents were forged: in his own chambers he could acknowledge so much; he had himself—being pressed for money, and being quite sure that his brother would never go to Newbury, where awkward inquiries might be made—written those papers, signed them, and—most fatal error!—presented them himself. Why, if only he had observed the common precaution of getting another man to hand them in across the counter—if only he had sent a clerk or some other irresponsible person! But to go himself—to forget that his name belonged to a great city House, and was sure to attract attention—he must have been mad.

To be sure it was not wise to forge the things at all. But then he was so hard up at the time; he had private expenses which he could not well explain to Anthony; he had lost his own money: he wanted everything he could lay his hands on: that hundred and fifty every year seemed like a little windfall, providentially sent. We need not imagine that Stephen was at all repentant about the crime; he was only sorry that it had been found out. Hardened persons, habitual criminals, go off in two directions: they are very sorry when things are discovered, and they are angry when they think of the necessities of the moment which made the crime absolutely unavoidable. But neither state of mind is at all akin to what the good chaplain of the prisons means by a heartfelt repentance.

'How much goes to a "reasonable" annuity?' he thought, reflecting on the proposal; 'the estate is worth twelve thousand a year, at the very least. I shall be reasonable on two. Yes, two thousand will do for me.'

'As for that woman, Rachel Nethersole, she must be five-and-fifty. Perhaps she will go off suddenly: some of these old cats do when they are not too venomous. Then I could get back to England.

'Things might be worse. Considering what a tremendous pull they've got, things might be worse. I suppose that fighting is out of the question. A man can't fight, unless he is obliged, with the prospect of a—a—suit of yellow and grey, and no tobacco, and no drink, and no companionship. Hang it all!

'Gad!' he brightened up a little; 'there are plenty of fellows knocking about the Continent under a cloud: good fellows, too, who have got hard up, and done something which has been found out. One pull for me that I shall know their little histories and they won't know mine. I know them all already. I shall meet the Honourable Major Guy Blackborde, who cheated at Monaco when I was there, and was turned out of the army: and Captain de Blewdeville, who got into the little mess at the Burleigh Club when I was a member, and had to go. By Gad! I shall enjoy it. And with two thousand a year one will be cock of the walk.

'Of course I shall not stay in Spain: the cookery is too disgusting. The old woman will forget all about me, or she will relent, or something, and then I shall go to Paris, and so back to London. And as to Alison, why—why——'

Here he stopped, then he went on to consider what he should start with. Two thousand a year, say. That means more than a hundred and fifty a month, five thousand francs a month: a great deal may be done with that. Then there was still seven hundred or so left out of Jack Baker's thousand. Of course he

was not going to pay that away. Then there was the furniture of his chambers, which was good, with the pictures and statuettes, which were not good, having been taken chiefly with money advances: furniture and pictures could be sold by private contract; altogether he would begin the new life, *outre mer*, with a thousand pounds of capital, in addition to two thousand a year income. That was better than in the old days. And if things went wrong, there was always his daughter, he thought, to fall back upon.

Lastly, there was one thing more: he might marry. A man of his means was an eligible *parti*; there were plenty of widows with good incomes on the Continent; if their reputations were a little cracked, what matter? so was his.

It will be seen that this was the meditation of a perfectly selfish man. Stephen Hamblin rose to great heights of selfishness. He had divested himself, as much, perhaps, as man can do so, who is not Cæsar, Kaiser, Czar, of any consideration for any other human being whatever. He was unto himself a god.

He laughed, thinking of matrimony. And then he remembered the manuscript which his cousin had placed in his hands. He opened it and read it.

'The Journal of a Deserted Wife.'

We have read this tearful document. We have seen how it affected a man of middle age, and a very young man, both of whom carried their hearts ever in the right place. This man was not affected at all, although he was the person chiefly interested in it. He read it right through slowly and carefully, without betraying the slightest emotion. When he had quite finished it, he tossed the paper on the table.

'That's done with,' he said. 'Hang it! it was done with twenty years ago. Rachel seems to have developed a fine thirst for revenge. Luckily she thought it was Anthony: luckier still that Anthony got drowned. I suppose it was this document that he was going to communicate to me when he made that appointment which he never kept. It would have been deucedly unpleasant. I should have had to get away at once, while he informed the magistrate that it was not he, but his brother, who had married Dora Nethersole.

'So Anthony took the child; and I never knew there was a child at all. Just like Dora, not to tell me. A little mystery; something to hide; something to make her important. How she *did* exasperate me! And what a relief it was to feel free! and what an almighty ass I was not to let Anthony marry her at the very beginning, when he wanted to! That was my infernal conceit. I wanted to cut out the model brother; and the end of it is that I've got a daughter who turns up, after twenty years, and cuts *me* out.'

He took up the manuscript again, and read the concluding paragraph.

'She knew she was going to die, and she couldn't take the trouble to write and tell me so. Her husband wasn't to know it. Must needs write to Anthony. It's all of a piece. That is what she called wifely obedience. As for the letters she *did* write to me at that time, they were dismal enough, but not a word about dying.

'They hand me over this precious journal in order to soften the hardness of my heart, I suppose. Well, my heart is pretty tough by this time. The tears of a woman—especially if the tears are twenty years old—are not likely to trouble it. What does soften a man's heart is to be caught in a cleft stick, as I have been caught—to have the ball in my hands, and be compelled to drop it. Good heavens! here I am, the undoubted owner of a quarter of a million of money, besides all the land and houses, and I've got to go away for life on an annuity, or else—or else——why, it seems almost worth fighting for. One might get off; these things are not easy to prove; the evidence would rest entirely on the clerk who knew me. But then there are the papers; they are in my handwriting; and it would be a deuced uncomfortable thing to stand in the dock under such a charge, and more uncomfortable still to get quodded—hang it! one might be in for fourteen——no—no—I can't fight. I must submit. I will go to-morrow.'

The idea of the convict garb made his hands to tremble. He sought and found consolation in a small glass of brandy neat.

'My last appearance to-night in the club, I suppose, or anywhere else. I feel as if I were going to die and be buried. Well, there are one or two places I know of in Paris, and Naples, and Vienna. A man with a couple of thousand a year may get along anywhere.'

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was his friend, Jack Baker.

The honest Jack looked down on his luck. He showed it by a red cheek, a twitching lip, an anxious eye, and apparel slightly disordered. Stephen, on the contrary, showed few outward and visible signs of discomfiture. His cheek was paler than usual: his eyes were hard and glittering; but he was not dismayed nor cast down: he met the reverses of fortune with anger, not with despondency.

'Did you get any notes?' asked Jack.

'What notes?'

Stephen's mind was full of more important things.

'My notes of last night and this morning.'

'Oh! yes—yes.' He searched among the letters on the table. 'Excuse me, I had forgotten them—ah! you asked me to pay

into the bank the thousand pounds you advanced me—do you?'

'I did last night. This morning—Hamblin,' breaking in with a sudden eagerness of manner, 'you haven't paid it into my bank yet, have you?'

'No, certainly not; I have been busy all day.'

'Good—don't; pay it to me in notes and gold.'

'What's the matter, Jack?' For his voice and manner both betokened something disastrous.

Mr. Bunter Baker tried to laugh, but the effort was not successful.

'A check in the flow of prosperity,' he said—'just a slight check. As I said in my letter, there has been a most unprecedented and most sudden fall. All my calculations were upset, and I had the biggest thing on, too. Hamblin, if it had turned up trumps, I might have gone out of business to-day with a hundred thousand pounds. As it is—well—as it is—all the trade know already, and all the world will know to-morrow. I am—for the moment only—compelled to suspend——'

'Oh!'

So here was another man come to grief. Stephen stared unsympathetically. It was as he thought. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps he might meet Mr. Bunter Baker on the Continent in an extreme condition of shabbiness.

'The Bank will have to meet the differences this time,' Jack went on. 'Well! they have had a very pretty penny out of me, one way and another.'

'And what will you do?'

The man of self-reliance tossed his head.

'A man like me,' he said, 'falls light. I shall lay by for a bit while the liquidators take hold of the estate and get what they can for themselves first, and the creditors next, out of it. When things have blown over, I shall come back again and carry on the same old game. That thousand will come in mighty handy. I saw the directors to-day, and had it out with them. They said nasty things, but, as I told them, they couldn't expect me to be a prophet. I wanted prices to go up. I always do. I did my little best to keep them up. And after all, they've been paying sixteen per cent. for the last eight years, and can afford a little loss. They take the risk and share the profits. I don't grumble, why should they?'

He sat down and hurled this question at Stephen as if he was personally concerned in the success of the bank.

'I knew there would be a smash some day,' he went on; 'at least, I thought there might be. I went for big things, and they came off one after the other, beautiful; and for bigger, and they came off; and then I went for the very biggest thing

possible, and it hasn't come off. Very well, then—You can let me have that thousand back. Hamblin, can you?'

'You remember, Jack, the conditions on which it was borrowed?'

'Hang the conditions!'

'By no means. You were to have three thousand when I came into the estate. Very good: *I have* come into the estate.'

'Nonsense!' This was something like news.

'It has been ascertained that my brother never married. Do not ask me any questions, because the rest is family business. My brother never married, as I always told you. Therefore——'

'Therefore, the three thousand are mine,' cried Jack with great delight, clapping Stephen on the shoulder. 'When shall you be ready to part?'

'That I cannot say. But I suppose there will be no further opposition to my raising money on the estate. Meantime, my dear boy, I cannot let you have your original thousand back, because it is all spent.' Stephen looked quite youthful and expansive as he uttered this genial string of falsehoods. 'However, as I suppose a little ready money would be handy just now——'

'It would,' said Jack; 'lend me what you can.'

'I will give you,' replied Stephen, taking his cheque-book, 'seventy-five. That will be something for you to go on with. Another hundred, if you want it, in a week or two. You can depend upon me, my dear fellow. Stephen Hamblin never forgets a friend.'

They shook hands warmly. That was the sort of sentiment which went home to the heart of Jack.

'No more,' he said, 'does J. double-B., especially,' pocketing the cheque, 'when he's got some of the ready to remember him by.'

Fully satisfied with the advance, and the assurance of further help, Jack took his leave. After all, he had done pretty well with his venture. Three thousand to come in *after* he had made his composition with creditors was not a bad sum to begin again upon. And he always had his reputation for luck to fall back upon.

As he went out he passed, in the door, Miss Hamblin. He took off his hat as she passed up the stairs to her uncle's chambers. Her face was pale and anxious.

'Ah,' thought Jack, 'she has found out by this time, and she's going to make things square with her uncle. Well, she'll find him in good temper. And now I think she'll begin to be sorry that she didn't have *me!* Laughed at *me*, by Gad!'

He turned as he passed through the door, to look once more

at the tall and graceful figure of the most splendid girl he had ever known.

Alison mounted the stairs, and found herself for the first time knocking at Stephen Hamblin's door.

He had lit a cigar, and was making a few calculations in pencil, when she opened the door and timidly stole in.

He put down the cigar, and rose with surprise, and a feeling of pain and shame. Before him, with crossed hands and down-dropped eyes, stood—his daughter.

'You here, Alison, of all places in the world? I thought at least I should have been spared this.'

'I have just now learned the truth,' she said, with trembling voice; 'my cousin Augustus told me—what you know—what they have found out.'

'Did they invite you to come here and see me?'

'No; I thought you would like to see me, and say something—if only that you may forgive me for the hard things that I have said and thought about you.'

'Oh, come, Alison!' cried the man, impatiently, 'we do not want sentiment, you and I. Be reasonable. You don't suppose I jump for joy because you are my daughter. You don't suppose that I expect you to fly into my arms because they say I am your father. Don't let us be fools.'

The tears came into the girl's eyes. She had been a fool; she had deluded herself into the belief, as she drove into town, that he would be touched by the discovery; she thought they would exchange words of regret and reconciliation; she looked for some words of endearment; and this was the way in which she was met.

'Sit down, then, and talk. But don't begin to cry, and don't talk sentiment. First of all, what did Augustus tell you?'

'That you are my father, and that you did not know that you had a child at all.'

'Good—that is true. What else did he tell you?'

'Nothing else—yes: he said that you had renounced your claim to the estate and were going away. I came to ask you——'

'He did not tell you why,' Stephen interrupted.

'No.'

'Since he did not, I shall not,' he said, with the air of a man who had been doing good by stealth. 'Sufficient that it is so. I am going to travel, and to forget in travel, if possible, all the annoyances I have had in this business. I hardly blame you, Alison. It would be absurd to blame you, altogether, for the attitude you assumed. When I became quite certain that my brother had never married, I resolved to befriend you. I made two distinct offers to you, which you refused with scorn and

contumely. You remember that—I do not, I say, reproach you ; that is all over. Now that I learn the truth, I recognise the fact that my brother desired that you should never find it out, and that he wished you to inherit his property. Therefore, I retire.'

This was very grand, and Alison was greatly affected.

'But it is all yours,' she said.

'It is all mine, until I have signed a deed of transfer—to you,' he replied, waving his hand as one who confers a kingdom.

She could not reply.

'I will tell you more,' her father went on. 'I believe the reason why my brother kept this thing a secret was, that I married the girl with whom he was in love. He spoke to her sister, Miss Nethersole, about her : I, meantime, spoke to the young lady herself. As Miss Nethersole refused to listen to the match proposed by the elder brother, on some religious ground, I believe, the younger brother thought it was no use for him to try that way. So he persuaded the girl into a secret marriage, and the day after they were married they eloped.

'Well'—he went on, carefully folding up the 'Journal of a Deserted Wife,' and putting it into his breast-pocket, to prevent the chance of her seeing it—'we were not suited to each other. Put it, if you please, that I was too young to be married—that I have never been what is called a marrying man ; we were unhappy together. I said that it would be well to part for a time : I left her—it was by her own wish and choice—at the seaside : you were born : she told me nothing about it : she fell ill : she wrote to my brother when she became worse : she died : he told me of the death, but not of the birth : I forgot all about my marriage : it was just exactly as if I had never been married at all.'

This was a rendering of the history which had somehow a false ring about it : it was too smooth and specious. But Alison tried to believe it.

'Mind,' he said, 'I do not attach any blame to my wife ; I should be unwilling for you to think that she was to blame. Let all the blame, if there is any, fall on me. Some, perhaps, on my brother, but not much. No doubt, poor Anthony acted for the best, and persuaded himself that the wisest thing for you was to bring you up in ignorance of your parentage ; later on, he became fond of you, and grew more unwilling still to part with you. So he invented the fiction of your being his daughter. It was clever of him, but it has led us all into strange paths. Things would have been different with me, and with you too, if we had known all along what we were to each other.'

'And now,' asked Alison, 'can there never be anything between us but formal friendship ?'

'Never,' said Stephen, shaking his head and putting his hands into his pockets, as if he was afraid that his daughter might offer to fondle them. 'Never. Do not let us pretend to try. Why, we could not begin all at once to bill and coo to each other. I could never endure, for instance, such endearments as you used to lavish on your supposed father.'

'No,' said Alison, sadly, 'that would be impossible. But kindness of thought——'

'Rubbish, Alison. You will marry some day, I suppose——'

'I am going to marry Gilbert Yorke.'

'Ah!' He started. Gilbert Yorke was the young man who had been present at the family council. 'Ah! you will marry him! That makes it doubly impossible for us ever to be friends. You are going to marry a man—well, never mind. No more sentiment, Alison. You have got a father, and I have got a daughter. It is a relationship which begins to-day. Let it end to-day.'

It was harsh, but Alison somehow felt a little relieved. She would have liked a few words of sympathy, of hope, of kindness. She could not contemplate without a shudder the simple operation of kissing her 'uncle,' Stephen the Black. And she was humiliated to find that one whom she had always regarded as the Awful Example was actually her father.

'By-the-way,' he went on, pleasantly, 'I think I have got one or two things here which you might like to have.' He opened a desk and began to rummage among the papers. 'I know that Anthony sent the things to me when Dora died. I put them away, and I haven't looked at them since. Ah! here they are.'

He handed to Alison a small packet containing a portrait of a sweet-faced girl, with light hair and blue eyes, very different to her own; and another containing one or two books of devotion: this was all that remained of Dora Hamblin.

'Now go, Alison,' said Stephen. 'You may cry over them at home if you like. Good-bye. You will not see me again for a very long time—perhaps never.'

Alison took them tearfully.

'Now go, Alison,' repeated Stephen, in his harshest voice; 'go, I say; cry over them at home as much as you please. Have you anything more to tell me?'

'No,' she replied. 'Stay, I have a message from my aunt Rachel.'

'From Rachel Nethersole?' Stephen became suddenly and deeply interested. 'She is with you, is she? She knows? What does that excellent lady say? What did she tell you?'

'When I told her what I had learned, she cried, and said that she wanted nothing now but to ask pardon of my father—I mean,

your brother. When I said I was coming here, she kissed me, and bade me tell you that for my sake she would forgive you all. "All," she told me to say.'

'Did she?' cried Stephen, as a new light came into his eyes. 'Did she? She will forgive all, will she? A brave old girl. That is right—and—and—Alison, I think I shall reconsider that question of the transfer.' He looked his daughter in the face with a sudden change of manner which startled and terrified her. 'Perhaps it will be best to arrange things differently. I shall see. I shall think things over. Go now.'

He almost pushed her out of his room.

Then, left quite alone, he gave way to every external sign of joy. These signs were undignified, and we therefore pass them over.

'I've done them again!' he cried. 'By Gad! I've done them again. And I shall have the handling, all to myself, of the whole big pile.'

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW YOUNG NICK FETCHED THE WRITING-MASTER.

The boy remained behind the screen, as we have seen, until the footsteps in the passage were silent. Then he emerged from his hiding-place. His face was scared, though his movements, as we have seen, indicated joy. The occasion had come, then, at last. This was the day, the very day, for which he had so longed—the day of greatness. On no other occasion could Anthony Hamblin be so dramatically, so *usefully* restored to his own people; in no other way could the discomfiture of Stephen be so complete. He had been proved to be a forger; that would be a blow to Alison, should the fact be told her: by Anthony's intervention the thing might be hidden. He was to be the heir to the whole estate; he was to go away on a large annuity: very good, he would have to go on nothing.

He rapidly reviewed the arguments for immediate action, and then, resolved to lose no time, he slipped cautiously out of the room, passed with noiseless step by the doors of the two partners, and ran down the broad staircase.

In the doorway he found Gilbert Yorke, who was waiting for a cab to take him to Clapham.

'Well?' asked young Nick, with his usual twinkle, 'have you found anything? Have you got the marriage?'

Gilbert laughed, and nodded.

'You shall hear all about it,' he said, 'in good time.'

'Ah!' replied the boy, 'now you think you've been mighty deep, I suppose. Mark my words, Gilbert Yorke. You'll own, before long, that there's one who has been deeper. Where are you going now?'

'I am going to Clapham, to tell Alison something.'

'Oh, very good. Yes; your exertions have been creditable, I'm sure. But my turn will come later on, and then, if you find your nose out of joint, don't say I did not warn you.'

Gilbert laughed again.

'What did I say once?' the boy went on, folding his arms, and leaning against the doorpost; '"Just when you think everything is cleared up, you turn to me and I will astonish you." That is what I said. Now *is* everything cleared up?'

'It is. I can tell you so much. Alison will learn all from me in half an hour. This evening there is going to be a sort of family council at the House.'

'Ah! Please tell the partners, with my compliments—Mr. Nicolas Cridland's compliments—that if they think everything is cleared up, they are mightily mistaken. And as for Alison, remind her that the writing-master leads a happy life. Now don't botch that message, young man. Give it her in full, just as I have told you.' He began to look positively demoniac, dancing on the pavement, and twinkling with his pink eyes under his white eyebrows. 'Oh, ah! Yes; all cleared up. Ha! ha! ho! ho! what a jolly game it will be, to be sure.'

Gilbert began to think young Nick was off his head. There could be nothing more to know.

'I'm the man in the play who turns up at the last moment, and pardons the conspirator for love of the lady he wants to marry. I'm the man who comes home with a pocket full of money, and pays off the wicked lawyer. I'm the man who draws aside the curtain with a "Houp-la! Hooray! There-you-are-and-who'd-a-thought-it?"'

Then the cab came up.

'If you want to see larks—if you want to be taken aback as you never were so taken aback in all your born days before—if you want to see ME in the proudest moment of my life—you turn up at the house to-night about nine o'clock or thereabouts. Oh! and if you are going there now, you may tell the old lady that I've got important business in the City, and shall not come home to tea—that's all. Ta-ta!'

He pulled his hat farther over his forehead and strode out of Great St. Simon Apostle with as much noise and importance as boots at fourteen can produce. When he got to the end of Carmel Friars, he turned to see if by any chance Gilbert was following him. He was not.

Then he pursued his way as rapidly as possible down Grace-

church Street, Eastcheap, to Tower Hill, past the entrance to the docks, through Cable Street to Jubilee Road, where he knocked at the door of the house in whose window was the advertisement of Mr. Hampton, Writing-master.

Mr. Hampton was not in. He would return, perhaps, at five or so, but the woman could not tell.

This was extremely annoying, because, all the way along, Nicolas had been arranging in his own head a little drama between himself and Anthony. He was to assume the Grand Style which Mr. Matthew Arnold so much admires; he was to be calmly, impressively judicial: he was not to argue, but to command. And Anthony was not to argue either, but to obey the superior will of the boy. Young Nick possessed a lively imagination, and really worked up a very fine scene, something on the lines of a well-known situation in *Athalie*, which he had been reading lately at school.

All this was completely spoiled, because the drama was incomplete without two performers, and one of them was away.

Nicolas haunted the hot street all the afternoon, growing every moment more impatient, and continually losing more of the Grand Style, till at last there was none of it left at all.

At five o'clock the writing-master had not returned. Then the boy went to the coffee-house where he had first made his wonderful discovery, and ordered tea, with shrimps and watercresses. He had great joy in the independence of this meal, but he was anxious to bring off his grand coup, and could not linger. After it he went again to the house, and being tired of walking up and down on the shady side of the pavement, asked permission to wait in Mr. Hampton's room.

He sat down in Anthony's arm-chair, and presently, being tired, went fast asleep. When he awoke it was nearly eight o'clock, and already in the badly-lighted room it was growing dark. Before him stood his uncle.

Young Nick sprang to his feet, and clutched him by the arm.

'I've been waiting for you all the afternoon,' he cried, reproachfully. 'Where have you been idling about?'

'I've been keeping punishment school,' said Anthony humbly; 'my turn comes once a month.'

'O Lord!' the boy ejaculated with infinite disgust; 'he's been keeping punishment school, while I've been looking for him. However, you've come at last—sit down. Have you had your tea?'

'I've had some tea and bread and butter with the boys,' replied his uncle.

'Well! you shall have some champagne and grilled chicken for your supper,' the boy told him encouragingly. 'A spread

eagle and champagne for supper you shall have, or I'll know the reason why.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Exactly what I say. The game's finished; it is all found out, and you may put on your hat and come home with me as soon as ever you like.'

'All found out?'

'Part ferreted out, part made out. Gilbert Yorke had a lot of things told him by Miss Nethersole, and fished up the rest. He's not a bad sort, that young man, if he didn't fancy himself too much. I suppose I ought not to grumble because he's cut me out with Alison. What a donkey you've been, Uncle Anthony, to be sure! What a donkey! Fancy wanting to screen Uncle Stephen! You see I know the whole story—forged receipts, runaway marriage—all. So don't pretend any more. WHAT A DONKEY!'

'It was for Alison's sake,' pleaded the donkey. 'I wanted to save her.'

'And the end of it is, that you haven't saved her. She knows who her father is by this time, and might just as well have known before. A pretty father for a young woman who respects the fifth commandment.' He looked at his watch. 'A quarter past eight,' he said; 'plenty of time. I told him about nine o'clock.'

'You told whom?'

'Gilbert Yorke. Told him to look out for games of a most surprising kind at nine o'clock. Now just you listen, and don't say a word till I tell you to speak.' If it was not the Grand Style, it was the Cocky style, which has been overlooked by critics, and is yet sometimes extremely effective. 'All you've got to do is to listen to me, and behave accordingly. Sit down.'

The writing-master humbly took a chair. By this time he had got disreputably shabby, and it was not so dark but that the condition of his boots was apparent, though the shininess of his coat-sleeves was partly hidden. The heels had long been down. Now they were gone at the toes, and chinks in the leather revealed on either foot a patch of white.

'You don't look as if your salary was paid regularly,' said the boy sternly, pointing to the boots.

'It's such a very small salary,' replied the poor man; 'and eating costs such a lot. One must eat, you know. It is not altogether the profession one would choose for a son, that of writing-master in a private academy.'

'No,' said Nicolas, with severity; 'it certainly is not. However, you can get your hat, and come away to Clapham with me, because that fooling is over.'

'Nonsense!' said Mr. Hampton; 'what should I do that for?

Clapham? I never heard of that place. All that to me is gone and forgotten. I am nothing now but a half-starved usher, and I shall never be anything else.'

'And Alison, is she forgotten too? What you did for her sake, Uncle Anthony, five months ago, you will have to undo for her sake.'

'Boy! tell me what has happened!'

Young Nick laughed. He was entire master of the whole situation. It belonged to him. He held the strings of Destiny. He was the *Deus ex machinâ* whose functions he had that very morning, with contempt for the mercantile uselessness of Latin, painfully construed.

He looked at his watch again.

'We've got a few minutes to spare.' Then he began his narrative, of which he delivered himself slowly and with importance, reflecting that this would certainly be regarded ever after as the greatest day of his life, and desirous of leaving nothing to regret in its history, no shortcoming, no failure, no lack of power to rise to the dignity of the situation.

'It began last week, when Alison took Mrs. Duncombe——'

'Mrs. Duncombe?'

'Oh yes! she's been staying with us since we found her out. But she was no good, and knew nothing; you took care of that. Your craft and subtlety about that baby, Uncle Anthony, astonished everyone. Nobody more than myself, I must own, though perhaps I ought to know the world by this time.

'However,' he went on, after a little pause, during which he shook his head in a modest depreciation of himself, 'that is nothing. Alison and Mrs. Duncombe went off to Bournemouth. Of course, Gilbert Yorke went with them. I was not invited to go, so I stayed at home and took care of the old lady. We had Normandy pippins. Of course I suspected that something was up, and when Alison came back, two days later, crying and laughing both together, I was quite certain. Well, I listened, and I made out. They'd found out where Alison's mother was buried, and taken her to see the grave. That was why she was crying. The reason why she laughed was because Gilbert Yorke had begun the kissing all over again. However, as Alison wouldn't wait for me, I can't object. There's a mighty lot of kissing going on now, down at the House. The old lady and Alison are at it all the morning, with a—"Oh, my dear! how glad I am!" and "Oh, auntie! how happy I am!" And in the afternoon it's Aunt Rachel's turn; I shouldn't care much about kissing Aunt Rachel myself, but girls will kiss anything.'

'Aunt Rachel?'

Anthony Hamblin began to feel in a dream.

'Why, of course, Miss Nethersole. It's raining uncles and aunts. Do be quiet, and don't interrupt; time's getting very short.' The boy considered a minute—'Oh! about the kissing. Aunt Rachel meets Alison and takes her hand gingerly, as if she was something that must be handled, for fear of breaking, like a Richmond maid-of-honour. "My niece," she says—that's all—and kisses her on the forehead. In the evening Gilbert arrives, and Alison and he go into the garden and kiss each other in the conservatories. I know where I can stand and see them, and they don't know. Then they come back and pretend they haven't had their arms round each other. And to think of the way that girl used to pound away about truth and fibs, when I was a boy!'

'I suppose,' said Anthony, presently, 'that we shall get something coherent in time.'

'It's coming,' replied Nick; 'where shall I begin? After the Bournemouth expedition, letters and telegrams came thick from Gilbert, and Alison carried on in a most agitating way. Meals went anyhow. Several times I had to order the pudding myself. We knew she'd got a new aunt, and we made as much fuss over her as if it was a new baby.

'Very good. Gilbert came back, and there was a tremendous talking. It was then that kissing set in with such vigour. And one evening I heard him tell Alison that he had kept back part of the story, and would tell her afterwards. He has told her, I suppose, by this time, for I left him on his way to Clapham Common—in a hansom cab, if you please! I've got to travel on the knife-board. The day after he came back—it was in the evening: Alison was playing, and Gilbert was sitting by her whispering soft things in her ear: my mother was asleep: I was beginning one of those exercises, "The letters which I have received. The letters which my cousin (feminine) says she has burned"—you know—when the door opened, and a lady appeared. She just marched in, without being announced. She was in black, and she had a black bag with her—a lady with sharp chin, and a mouth that looked a little bit like the useful end of a pair of scissors. She set eyes on me first, and stared. It isn't manners, but I don't mind it much, because it isn't every day that people get a chance of seeing an Albino. So I nodded to encourage her, and then she looked at the old lady, who was fast asleep with her mouth open; then she saw Alison, who rose to meet her. "You are Alison Hamblin?" she asked; "you are more like your uncle than your father. I am your aunt, Rachel Nethersole. Let us try to be friends." Then kissing set in, and I was introduced, and Gilbert did a lot of talking.'

'Poor Alison,' said Anthony, hoarsely.

The boy was glad to see these signs of emotion, and turned his head.

'You see, uncle, Miss Nethersole didn't know everything. You and I know better than that.'

'How do you know? What do you know?'

'I know now as much as you do,' replied the boy. 'I wish I had known it five months ago. You and your writing-mastering!'

'Does anybody else know?'

'We all know everything—except that one thing that you and I know. And you've got to tell that to-night. Let me go on.

'Miss Nethersole agreed to stay, and they fetched in her things. Presently we had something hot—a kidney it was—for supper. I needed it. Evenings like that tell upon the strongest man. Three women to be comforted all at once is a large order.'

Nicolas shook his white locks *en philosophe*, and went on:

'After supper—Aunt Rachel did pretty well with the kidneys, but I had to lead the way, as usual—we all sat round, while Alison held her new relation's hand—you know their silly way—and we began to talk about you. The new aunt does not like you, uncle, and I saw her make faces while Alison and the old lady went on about your having been such a good man. I crammed my handkerchief in my mouth. O Jiminy!

'That was yesterday. And as if there wasn't enough to tell you, something else more important still happened to-day. Now, listen, with all your might. As it was a half-holiday I came up to town after dinner, to see what news there was in the City. Mighty little doing, as I found out from a little conversation with the senior clerks. However, as I was coming on to see you, I thought I would just drop in and look at your old room. Nobody has ever used it; your name is on the door; the furniture is untouched; there's your old blotting-pad, covered all over with heads in ink, in front of your own old chair. And there's the cabinet with the glass doors; I always wondered what you kept in that cabinet, uncle. Once I thought it was piles of money; then I thought it must be skeletons; then I thought very likely it was specimens of indigo. Well, to make quite sure, I opened the doors and found what it is you do keep there. Fie, uncle! I thought better of you. A decanter full of sherry and a couple of glasses! also a box of cigars, and half a dozen boxes of cigarettes. Call that business? When I had satisfied myself upon that point, I went and sat down in your chair, just to feel what it was like to be a rich man; and then I made myself a little speech, nobody being there to hear. I was getting along first-rate, thinking what a

clever sort of a man I was going to turn out, when I heard footsteps, and as I didn't wish to be caught, and look as much like a fool as it is possible for this young man to look, I nipped behind your old screen—you remember it, uncle—and sat down and listened. Mean, wasn't it? Wait till you hear what I found out, then you will jump for joy—and—oh! Jerusalem!

'There was Mr. Augustus first, and then Mr. William—he's had his wig put into black on your account—and then Mr. Billiter. Last came Gilbert Yorke, looking mighty important. A regular procesh, only they didn't sing a hymn. While they were disposing themselves in attitudes round the table like head-masters before a caning, or like ambassadors and plenipotentates at least, in marches Uncle Stephen.'

'What did they want with him?'

'Now, uncle, do not interrupt. That spoils every man's style. Cæsar, when he was writing his Commentaries for the Third Form, would never allow any interruption; nor would Cornelius Nepos when he hammered out his biographies for the Second. Mr. Augustus it was who went for him. "It's all found out," he says; "there was never any marriage, and you are the heir to the whole estate!" "Oh my gum!" said Uncle Stephen, turning very red; "then I suppose you are all going to apologise, are you?" "Devil a bit," said Mr. Augustus. Are you interested now, uncle?'

'Go on, boy—go on.'

Anthony Hamblin was pacing the little room, showing every sign of agitation.

'Then Uncle Stephen looked surprised. "You hardened villain!" says your cousin, looking like a judge on the bench, "there was no marriage of your brother, but there was of yourself. And who was your wife, and where is your daughter?" "What daughter?" says Stephen. "Alison," says Augustus. Well, Stephen was a bit staggered at that, as you may suppose. "And don't you think," says Augustus, "that we are going to sit down quietly and see you chuck the money. Quite the other way about and contrariwise. You've got to give it up and go away on a pound a week for the rest of your life." "Am I?" says Stephen. "You are," says Augustus. "Don't you wish you may get it?" says Stephen. "I do," says Augustus, "or else——" "Else what?" says Stephen. "Else," says Augustus, "we shall have to remind you of six little bits of paper bearing a dead woman's signature. Her sister will prosecute for forgery—for-ge-ry, Stephen; and it means fourteen years' quod, with skilly and cold water. How will you like that, Cousin Stephen?" Then they all chimed in, like a chorus in a play, "How will you like that, Cousin Stephen?" I thought of joining in myself, but didn't. Stephen took it quite comfort-

ably. He's a desperate wicked chap, that Stephen. Fancy going about with six forgeries on your conscience—a most awful wicked chap. He never said he was sorry: never said he wished he hadn't done it—not at all. He only growled; and then he said something about going abroad on a pension; and then he put on his hat and walked out of the room.'

'Is it possible?'

'So now you see. You ran away: you left me, your little comforts, and your home, in order to save Alison from finding that her father wasn't you at all, but the other fellow, and from learning what a desperate bad lot he is. And now, she will learn it all, and there will be the most terrific row that ever was heard of. Stephen Hamblin will very likely be charged with forgery—that's a very pretty thing to happen in the family—and Alison Hamblin will learn that he is her father. That's what has been brought about by your running away, to say nothing of the awful expense in crape.'

Anthony stood irresolute.

'What shall I do?' he cried. 'The very worst has come to pass—the very thing that most I dreaded. I thought to avert this blow. I thought that my own death would do it. I thought that sorrow was better than disgrace; and Alison has had the sorrow, and now will have the disgrace.'

'She need not if you will return, because then Uncle Stephen will be coopered, and Aunt Rachel can be squared. You can stop the prosecution. Come, Uncle Anthony; they won't mind your boots.'

'It isn't the boots I'm thinking of,' said Anthony, gravely.

'Is it the feeling that you will look such an ass?' asked the boy with ready sympathy. 'No one *could* look a bigger donkey—that's true—if he was to try with all his might. But never mind that; the servants are all in mourning still—ho! ho!—and the old lady's got a new cap trimmed with crape home yesterday—ho! ho!—and there's the black band round my hat—ho! ho! ho!—and there's the tablet in the church—ho! ho! ho! ho! What a game it will be! You'll have to pay the bill for everything but your own funeral. I wish we could hire a mourning coach for us to go home in—I wonder if my pocket-money would run to it.'

The boy, who was half hysterical by this time, broke into inextinguishable laughter, which naturally led to choking and to tears.

'Come, Uncle Anthony.' He wiped his eyes, and put his uncle's hat on for him. 'What a shocking bad hat!' He took him by the hand, and led him unresisting into the street. 'I've got three shillings in my pocket, that will take us to Clapham Common. We will walk up to the door. I will smuggle you

into the study. Then I will go away and bring you——' His voice broke again into a sob. 'Poor Alison!' he cried; then he brushed away his tears. 'First thing you must do, is to put on a pair of new boots. Any other man but myself would be ashamed to be seen walking in company with such beasts of boots. I always used to keep you respectable in the old time, and I mean to again, remember that.'

CHAPTER THE LAST.

HOW YOUNG NICK ACHIEVED GREATNESS.

When Stephen Hamblin saw his daughter fairly out of the room, and got through those manifestations of joy of which we have spoken, he began, once more, to reconsider everything. Now the message which Miss Nethersole sent him by means of his daughter was nothing short of an Evangel, a Blessed Gospel, to him. It relieved him, at one stroke, of all anxiety on the one side where his armour was weak; and even while he thought of the opportuneness of this truly Christian message, a way occurred to him by which he might, even without it, face the worst and challenge his enemies to do their worst.

'Augustus and the crew,' he thought, 'rejoiced to have that trump card in reserve. They knew that I did not suspect its existence, and was not prepared to answer it. They played it fairly well, considering. But not so well—no, not so well as I mean to play *my* trump card, presently. It is not only forgiveness, but justification.'

This message of Rachel's, too, showed him how wrong he had been in his treatment of Alison. He should not have met her approaches with coldness: he should not have received her timid advances with a snub; he should have welcomed her: held out his arms: tried, at least, to kiss her: and, without a murmur, should have submitted to any endearments which the girl might offer. To be sure, the style and title of daughter no more commanded his affection than that of niece: his heart, which had long since ceased to feel any warmth towards Alison's mother, by no means leaped up at the meeting with Dora's daughter. Quite the reverse. He felt that the whole thing was a *gêne;* he would very much have preferred Alison to have continued Anthony's daughter.

You cannot, however, by wishing, reverse the current of affairs. That is an axiom in the First Book of Fate; and the

wise man makes the best of materials in his hands. The materials in Stephen's hands was a girl ready to acknowledge him as her father, and do her best to enact the part of Christian daughter; a sister-in-law who had been deeply wronged, and who, for the sake of that daughter, was ready to forgive and forget the past: a little knot of conspirators, eager to get rid of him, to push him off the scene, to land him, once and for all, across the Channel.

Very good: but one thing they had forgotten. Not only did Miss Nethersole forgive, which they either did not know or took care not to mention, but in striking at him they *would strike at Alison.* Yes, and at themselves; at the family name, at everything held dear by the Hamblins.

The more he turned the matter over in his mind, the more he became convinced that to strike the flag at once was impolitic and—still more—useless. A change of front was not only possible, but advisable.

'Why,' asked this just man, 'should I abandon what is mine because they threaten? What can they do? What can they prove? Would they dare to try it? And since the woman sends me that message, why there is nothing more to be feared. I will stay.'

After dinner he thought the thing over again, and became so convinced that his best course was to take advantage of Rachel Nethersole's forgiving disposition, that he sent for a cab and drove to Clapham, to 'my own place,' he said to himself. 'And I dare say,' he continued, being now very cheerful over the new prospects, 'I dare say that the time will come when I may endure the girl's affectionate ways as Anthony used to. Pretend to like them, too. It's awkward becoming a father when you least expect it. A grown-up girl, too, with a temper of her own, one with whom you have had rows: it is a very embarrassing position, and requires a great deal of presence of mind. This afternoon I was a fool. I've been a fool all day, I think. Things came upon me too unexpectedly. A man can't stand a big fortune, *and* a grown-up daughter, *and* threatenings of criminal proceedings all at once. However, I have cooled down, and shall play my next card very much better, as my dear friends and cousins will shortly discover.'

It was somewhat unfortunate that he chose that evening to carry out his purpose, because it was the time which the partners, accompanied by Mr. Billiter, had chosen for their family council.

Gilbert Yorke, Alderney Codd, Mrs. Cridland, and Miss Nethersole all assisted on this occasion, the importance of which was realised by no one so much as by Alderney Codd. The fur coat was necessarily discarded owing to the return of sum-

mer, but its place was worthily taken by broadcloth of the best and newest, while the condition of wristbands, front, and collar showed what an excellent thing a little steady occupation is for a man. True, his work was over; there was no more employment for him in rummaging among registers: but he had not yet realised that the suspension of work meant cessation of income. At present he was entirely filled with a sort of holy joy on account of Anthony's rehabilitation, and he had thought of a beautiful verse from Horace which he intended to quote as soon as he could find an opportunity. It was not entirely novel, but then Alderney's scholarship was not entirely fresh—over-ripe, perhaps. The effort to lug in the lines somehow proved unsuccessful for the first half-hour or so, during which Augustus was explaining the new position of affairs, how Stephen had resolved on leaving his daughter in undisputed possession—taking only an annuity out of the estate. These dry details gave no opportunity for Horatian sentiment.

Augustus Hamblin took the opportunity of reminding Alison—this was a precautionary measure, in case she should allow herself to fall in love, so to speak, with her father, and then find out about the receipts, and be humiliated—that the discovery of her parent need not lead to any alteration in her own feelings concerning him, because he was going away for good. The observance of the fifth commandment, he explained, binding upon all Christians, would in her case be effected by the pious memory of the man who had stood *in loco parentis*, in the place of a parent to her. Here Alderney thought he saw his chance, and struck in, '*Quis desiderio*,' but was interrupted by a gesture from his cousin, who went on to set forth that in her real father Alison had before her an example which her friends would not advise her to follow, and although filial piety would not dwell upon his faults, it was impossible to hide them altogether; and, in fact, it had always been a thorn in the side of the family generally, that this member of it had turned out so ill.

'Things being so,' Augustus concluded, 'we could not but feel that for you and your fortune to be at the mercy of a man who has never shown even the most common prudence in money matters, would be a very disastrous thing. And it was with the greatest joy that we received from him an assurance that he was willing to accept an annuity, and not to take upon himself the responsibilities of paternity. In other words, my dear child, you will be in exactly the same position as if you were really Anthony's daughter.'

'I have seen him,' said Alison, quietly. 'He has told me that he does not want a daughter. He can never feel any affection for me; it is better that we should part.'

'Much better,' said Augustus

'I confess that it would be impossible for me to practise the same respect and obedience towards him as to my dear fath—I mean my uncle Anthony——'

'Always your father, Alison,' said Gilbert.

'*Quis desiderio*,' by Alderney again, when the door was thrown open, and the new father appeared.

He was acting elaborately; he had thrown aside the dark and down look with which he received Alison in the afternoon; he had assumed an expression of candour mixed with some kind of sorrowful surprise, as if he was thinking of the past; his dark eyes were full, as if charged with repentance.

'Alison,' he said, looking about the room, 'I see you are with my cousins, my very good friends, and Mr. Billiter, my well-wisher from youth upwards. I have disturbed a family gathering. May I ask, my child, what poison concerning your father they have poured into your ears? Miss Nethersole! Is it possible?'

Aunt Rachel shook her head violently, and pushed her chair back. But Stephen thought of the message.

Alison sprang to her feet, but was silent. She tried to speak, but could not. Gilbert held her hand.

'Stephen,' cried Augustus, 'what is the meaning of this language? You have already forgotten the interview of this morning. Must we tell your daughter all?'

'All that you please,' said Stephen, airily; 'you are free to tell Alison whatever you like.' He took her hand and drew her gently from Gilbert. 'Alison, my daughter, let me repeat your own words: "We have thought hard things, we have said hard things of each other. That was because we did not know the truth. Now we know it, let us not be separated."

'I was wrong this afternoon, because I had not yet realised what it meant to me, this gift of a daughter. I have thought it over since, and have resolved that it will be better for me, and for you too, if I renounce my scheme of living abroad, and instead, become your father, guardian, and best friend. As for my former life, it has been, I admit, devoted to pleasure; that is all finished. I was then a man without ties, and therefore, to a certain extent, a selfish man. Now I have you, my daughter, I have some one else in the world to live for. My brother Anthony acted, no doubt, for the best, but he acted wrongly towards me. Had I known, had I suspected, that you were my child, my course would have been different indeed; perhaps it would have been as blameless as that of my cousin, Alderney Codd.'

Alderney jumped in his chair and changed colour. It was to be hoped that Stephen was not going to begin revelations at this inconvenient time.

'I say so much, Alison,' Stephen went on, while Mrs. Cridland sat clutching Miss Nethersole's hand in affright, and the partners with the old lawyer stood grouped together—Gilbert retained his position behind Alison—'I say so much because you ought to know both sides. It matters little, now, why my cousins have become my enemies. You see that they are. I come here to-night proposing new relations. I take blame for the things I said this afternoon. Forgive me, my child. Your father asks for his daughter's forgiveness.'

'Oh!' cried Alison, moved to tears by this speech of the *père prodigue*, 'do not speak so. Do not talk of forgiveness. There is nothing to forgive.'

'Together, my dear, we can face our enemies, and bid them do their worst.'

He drew her to his side and laid her hand on his arm, in a manner as paternal and as true to nature as an amateur heavy father at private theatricals.

'This is truly wonderful,' said Mr. Billiter.

'Let them do their worst,' continued Stephen

'Why, in Heaven's name——' began Augustus, but was stopped by Stephen, who went on without taking the least notice of him.

'Miss Nethersole,' he said, 'I owe to you an explanation of a very important kind. I have read to-day the journal of my late wife, with feelings of the deepest sorrow. My neglect was not wilful, but accidental; the reduction of my wife's allowance was due to a heavy pecuniary loss: our separation was by mutual consent: I never received any letters from her at all. I concluded that she had carried her threat into execution and left me. When I had my remittances returned from Lulworth, I concluded that she had gone away from me altogether.'

'But, man,' said Rachel Nethersole, puzzled with this glib show of explanation, 'you went on drawing her allowance from me.'

'I did,' said Stephen, frankly—'I did; and the hardest, the most cruel, the most unjust accusation ever made against any man was made against me this morning by my own cousin. Alison, you shall hear it, unless, indeed, they have already told you.'

'What we have spared your daughter,' said Augustus, solemnly, 'you, too, would do well to spare her.'

'Spare her!' Stephen repeated. 'It was out of no consideration for me. Rachel Nethersole, I drew that hundred and fifty pounds a year for six years after my wife's death. She could not, poor thing, receive any of it. But how was I to know that? Who told me of her death? What did I know?'

'This is truly wonderful!' said Mr. Billiter again.

'Dora, before we parted to meet no more, signed a number of receipts. It was understood that she was not to be troubled in the matter. I heard no more. I went on presenting the receipts. I drew the money. That money, Rachel Nethersole has been strictly and honourably laid up ever since, to be returned to you when occasion should serve. I first laid it up for Dora, but, after six years, I heard from Anthony that she was dead, and then resolved to hand it over to you. But my life has been, as I said before, a selfish one. The money was there, but the occasion never came. At the same time, Rachel, I thank you most heartily for the message of forgiveness sent me by Alison. Although there was nothing to forgive, I accept the message as a token of goodwill.'

Rachel stared at him, as one dumbfounded.

'Am I,' she asked, 'out of my senses? Is this true?'

Mr. Billiter laughed in his hard, dry way.

'Quite as true, madam,' he said, 'as any other of the statements you have heard. Pray go on, Stephen.'

'No; I shall not go on. I have said all I had to say to Alison, my daughter, and to Miss Nethersole, my sister-in law. To them explanations were due. To you, my cousins, and to you, lawyer of the Devil, I have nothing to say except that, as this is my house, you will best please me, its owner, by getting out of it at once.'

The position was ludicrous. They who had come to tell Alison gently how her father, having been such a very bad specimen of father or citizen, had acquiesced in their proposal and was going to the Continent for life, never again to trouble anybody, stood looking at each other foolishly, the tables turned upon them. They were quite powerless. The master of the situation was Stephen. He was quite certainly the heir to the great estate: everything, including his daughter, was his, and in his power. The difficulty about the Letters of Administration could not any longer stand in his way: the crime was forgiven for the daughter's sake: and what, in Heaven's name, would be the end of the great Hamblin estate, grown up and increased through so many generations, developed by patient industry and carefulness to its present goodly proportions, fallen into the hands of a profligate, a black sheep, a prodigal son, who would waste, dissipate, lavish, squander, and scatter in a few years what it had cost so many to produce?

'It is a sad pity,' said Mr. Billiter, speaking the thoughts of all.

'Stephen,' said Alderney, 'if you are really going to take the whole estate for yourself——'

'I certainly am,' Stephen replied with a short laugh.

'Then there are one or two things that you *must* do. As a

man of honour and generosity, you *must* do them. There is Flora Cridland, for instance; you must continue to behave towards her as Anthony did.'

'Go on, Alderney.'

'Here is Gilbert Yorke, engaged to Alison.'

'Go on.'

His face expressed no generous determination to do anything at all.

'Well,' said Alderney, his nose becoming suffused with a pretty blush, 'if you cannot understand what you have to do, I cannot tell you.'

'I know what you mean. I am to continue to give my cousin, Flora Cridland, a lavish allowance for doing nothing. Flora, you know my sentiments. I am to take, with my daughter, all the hangers on and lovers who may have hoped to catch an heiress. Mr. Yorke, at some future time you may have an interview with me, in order to explain your pretensions. Lastly, Alderney, I am to lend you as much money as Anthony did, am I?'

'I was not thinking of myself,' said Alderney meekly. 'I only thought, as the poet says: "*Suave est ex magno tollere acervo.*" It is delightful to help yourself from a big pile. However——'

But Alison broke away from her father's arm, and caught the protective hands of Gilbert.

'No,' she said, with brightening eyes, 'Gilbert will not need to ask your permission; he has my promise. And he had the encouragement of my—my uncle Anthony.'

'Right, girl,' said Rachel Nethersole; 'you are right. If he turns you out, you shall come to me.' She too crossed over to her niece, and a pretty group was formed of Alison in the middle, Gilbert at her right, and Rachel at her left.

Stephen's face darkened: but he forced himself to be genial.

'Well,' he said, with a smile, 'one cannot expect daughters like mine to become obedient in a moment. Marry whom you please, Alison. Your husband, however, must look to please me before any settlements are arranged. Rachel Nethersole, I am sorry to see that your usual common-sense has failed you on this occasion.'

Rachel shook her head. She mistrusted the man by instinct.

'If I could believe you,' she murmured: 'if only I could believe you——'

There happened, then, a strange sound in the hall outside—shuffling steps—a woman's shriek—the voice of young Nick, shrill and strident, ordering unknown persons to be silent; in fact, they were William the under-gardener, and Phœbe the under-housemaid, and he was entering the house with his captive

when they rushed up the steps and Phœbe screamed, thinking in the twilight of the June night that she was looking upon the face of a ghost.

'Silence, all of you!' cried young Nick, excitedly, trying not to speak too loud; 'you chattering, clattering, jabbering bundle of rags, hold your confounded tongue! Take her away, William, stop her mouth with the handle of the spade—choke her, if you can. Now, then.'

They hardly noticed the noise in the study. It happened just when Miss Nethersole was expressing her doubts as to Stephen's perfect veracity. Everybody was discomfited. Mrs. Cridland was miserably wiping her eyes, thinking of the days of fatness, gone for ever: Miss Nethersole was uncomfortably suspicious that the man had not told her anything like the truth: the two partners were silent and abashed—they felt like conspirators who had been found out: Gilbert was hot and angry, yet for Alison's sake he was keeping control of his temper. Stephen himself was uncomfortable, trying to devise some method of restoring confidence, cursing Alderney for forcing his hand. Alderney was ready to sit down and cry: Mr. Billiter was apparently saying to himself for the third time:

'This is truly wonderful!'

And then Alison broke from Gilbert and Rachel, and, standing like a startled deer, cried:

'I hear a step—I hear a step.' And for a moment she stood with her hands outspread, listening.

Stephen took no notice of his daughter's extraordinary gesture. He addressed himself to Rachel, having his back to the door.

'I repeat, Rachel,' he said, 'that you have nothing to suspect or to disbelieve. I did not know for six years and more of the death of my wife——'

He did not hear the door open behind him: he hardly observed how Alison, with panting breast and parted lips, sprang past him: he did not hear the cry of astonishment from all, but he felt his dead brother's hand upon his shoulder: he turned and met his dead brother face to face, and he heard him say: 'Stephen, that is not true; you knew it a week after her death.'

All the pretence went out of him: all the confidence: all the boastfulness: he shrunk together: his cheek became pallid: his shoulders fell and were round: his features became mean: he trembled.

'Go,' said Anthony, pointing to the door—'go! I know all that you have done and said—go! let me never see you more, lest I forget the promise which I made by the deathbed of our mother.'

Stephen passed through them all without a word.

In the general confusion, no one noticed Alderney.

He waited a moment and then crept furtively out, and caught Stephen at the door.

'Courage,' he said; 'Anthony will come round. All is not yet lost.'

'You stand by a fallen friend, Alderney?' said Stephen, bitterly. 'Nay, man, go back and get what you can. I am ruined.'

'*Dives eram dudum*,' replied the Fellow of the College. 'Once I was rich. *Fecerunt me tria nudum*—three things made me naked: *Alea, vina, Venus.* You are no worse off, Stephen, than you were.'

As Stephen walked rapidly away across the common, it was some consolation to think that at this, the darkest moment of his life, he could reckon on the friendship of one man in the world—and on the promise made at a deathbed by another. As for the game—he had played for a high stake—he stood to win by long odds—and he lost.

'Oh, my dear! my dear!' cried Alison, forgetting her father altogether, as she clung to Anthony, and kissed him a thousand times. 'Oh, my dear! I said you would come back to me some time—somehow. I said you would come back.'

* * * *

Ten minutes later, when the confusion was over, young Nick touched his uncle on the arm, and whispered:

'It's all right about that desk in the office, of course? Very good. And now if I was you, I would sneak upstairs and change my boots, and put on another coat. I'll amuse Alison while you are gone. . . . . Old lady,' he stood in the full light of the gas, with his right hand modestly thrust into his bosom, and his left hand on his thigh—'Old lady, and everybody here present, I give notice that I am about to change my name. Henceforth I mean to be known as Nicolas Cridland Hamblin, Esquire, about to become, as soon as I leave school, a clerk in the firm of Anthony Hamblin and Company, Indigo Merchants, Great St. Simon Apostle, City.

THE END.

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